LET THEM CHOOSE

Cafeteria Learning Style for Adults

Jillian Douglas and Shannon McKenzie

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PREFACE: WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

As practitioners who design workplace learning experiences, we share a passion for transforming workplace learning to appeal to learner curiosity, influence behavior change, and generate meaningful, relevant experiences. Throughout our careers as learning professionals, we have observed a tendency of resistance to learning among those who seemed skeptical about workplace training in general. Some of the assumptions we witnessed include training classes are a waste of time; the content is generic and doesn't help with individual roles and responsibilities; and learners don't feel engaged in training in a personally meaningful and productive way.

Learning through experience is one of the most natural, basic concepts of learning. It's how we begin to understand the world as children, and we continue learning through and reflecting upon experiences throughout our lives: "Learning is a process whereby the individual reacts to, learns from, and builds on experiences. [John Dewey] posited experiences are continuous in that they build on each other, each one affecting future experiences. Continuity signifies that each experience influences a person whether it is for better or for worse" (Monk 2013, 65). As adults, many of us carry around stereotypes and negative associations toward training. Some of these beliefs stem from the learning experiences we had as young students in school.

As a child, Jillian (co-founder 1) was often bored and disengaged at school. She was bright but struggled through much of her education, failing to see its applicability to the real world as her teachers lectured to her and her classmates. Years later, after graduating with a BS in management, Jillian was thrust into a role as a training director for Goodwill Industries, tasked with helping underemployed or unemployed people re-enter the workforce. Knowing nothing at the time about instructional design and given little direction, she thought back to the best teachers she'd had. "The less they talked, the more I learned," she recalled. Unwilling to perpetuate the ineffective lecturing methods that had affected what she learned and determined to make a difference in the lives of her students, she experimented with self-taught methods of active learning, taking note of which approaches worked best. And thus began her lifelong love affair with transforming the learning experience.

Shannon (co-founder 2) also found herself immersed in the world of learning from a young age. As an avid observer of human connections, she practiced being a teacher as a child and spent her days writing detailed stories of life laden with emotional experiences. With her BA in English, she began her career as a technical writer focusing on the end user, advocating that learners should get the information they need when they need it. As she moved into instructional design, she strove to ensure that each individual's learning needs were met clearly, simply, and effectively.

By the time we formed Idea Learning Group, it had become all too clear that learners in the workplace were generally no better off than students in the classroom who—not unlike Jillian as a child—were subject to ineffective and outdated learning methods. For us, these outdated learning methods seemed to have been carried over as the default training option for most learning professionals, including ourselves. We had to figure out a new way of approaching learning at work.

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It was the week before a big presentation for our local ATD chapter conference in 2012, and for the past month, we'd spent hours putting together a carefully crafted presentation covering the science of learning,

one of our favorite topics. But as Shannon reviewed the materials for our presentation, it suddenly became strikingly clear: We were caught in a pickle. The slides were beautifully designed. The presentation was thorough. We knew the material inside and out.

There was just one big problem. It became increasingly clear to us that we were about to violate the very principles of brain-based learning that we'd set out to teach. Research has shown that people learn best through active, experiential, and social learning that is broken up into small and meaningful chunks. And yet here we were, clicking through slide after slide of information, lecturing to an imaginary audience on how to design brain-friendly learning programs.

We couldn't believe it. We weren't sure how we hadn't seen it before.

After all, we founded Idea Learning Group with the mission to improve the way people learn at work. We were progressive, forward thinking, and passionate about learning. So how was it that we now found ourselves here, violating the very rules we'd set out to champion?

We panicked. We had only a short amount of time until the conference, not enough to change the format of our presentation, our team advised. Besides, presenting any other way seemed risky, especially in front of a group of our peers. What if a new approach didn't work? What if we tried it, only to be laughed at by our fellow learning professionals? Regardless of how well founded a new approach might be, it's uncomfortable to step outside your comfort zone.

The clock was ticking.

Over the weekend, we both stressed about how—or even if—we should reformat our upcoming presentation on the science of learning, when an idea came to Jillian. Like many ideas, it wasn't entirely new. Years before, it had surfaced in a sudden moment of inspiration before quickly getting buried by the day-to-day responsibilities of life and work. Just like that, the idea had disappeared—until this particular Monday morning.

With the lightbulb in full blaze, we decided our plan of action. Before we'd even taken off our coats or poured our morning cup of tea, we gathered our team together.

"We're scratching everything," we announced. "We're starting over, and this is what we're going to do."

We detailed our vision: an interactive, play-based, experiential model that would allow learners to freely move around the room at their own speed and pace. Everything we'd discovered in our research—active learning, social learning, experiential learning, play—would be included.

And then for the important part: It would be station based, allowing learners to freely choose among the activities we'd prepared for them. Choice, we'd determined, was the component that most distinguished Cafeteria Learning from other models in the industry, even from more progressive approaches that were active and social.

We were invigorated, inspired, and ready to go.

As our team looked back at us, wide-eyed, it was apparent they thought we were crazy. But as we continued to explain our idea, they slowly began to see the potential, eventually giving way to unbridled enthusiasm.

We spent the next several days overhauling our presentation, transforming slides of lecture-based content into an array of hands-on, social activities and designing 15 different stations for learners to choose from (see chapter 10 for examples). We were nervous about trying a new approach, but we knew there was no turning back. We had the acute sense that maybe—just maybe—we were onto something. We had to find out.

When the big day arrived, we took a deep breath and introduced learners to our concept of Cafeteria Learning. Then, we let the participants loose to explore the learning stations. As they moved around to the various stations, we watched carefully to gauge their reactions. Were they enjoying themselves and engaging in the activities and with one another? Most important, were they learning?

We thought so, but even so, we were anxious. Our fears were finally quelled when a woman walked up to us after the workshop.

"I have to tell you," she started, as our hearts skipped a beat. "That was one of the best trainings I've ever attended." Then, she gave us a hug. Several other attendees came up to us after the event with positive feedback, too.

From that moment, we knew we were onto something. And that's how Cafeteria Learning was born, as an alternative or complement to traditional training. In practice, it's an approach to learning that allows instructional designers (chefs) to apply content (ingredients) to a variety of interchangeable activities (recipes), resulting in an informal classroom workshop in which each learner builds a customized learning experience (meal). It's our answer to passive, choiceless training that has become the norm.

You want to see learners light up, not shut down. You want learners to choose from a cornucopia of learning experiences rather than being force-fed learning. You want to see your company reap the benefits of well-executed training programs rather than grumble about their ineffectiveness. You want to transform workplace learning for the better. Read on to learn how.

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a world in which restaurants gave you only one choice. "This is what you're getting, and you'd better like it!" the waiter snarls as he places a plate of spaghetti in front of you. You used to love dining out—until now.

"Ugh. I hate spaghetti," you think to yourself as you pick up your fork to begin the less than exciting task of chewing your food. You feel more like a 5-year-old being force-fed your daily serving of vegetables than an adult enjoying a pleasant night out on the town.

We cannot help but cringe when we imagine a world of choice-less restaurants—not only because we like food way too much, but also because this scenario resembles today's learning and development field. Most organizations serve up learning programs that, even when masterfully prepared, lack an essential ingredient: choice.

Think about it. A chef may meticulously plan and carefully concoct a meal. She may prepare it with the very best ingredients, but not everyone will like it. One meal simply cannot meet everyone's needs.

Because most restaurants offer many options, ordering spaghetti—or chicken salad, or spicy fajitas—becomes an active choice rather than a reluctant "have to." Choice allows for a variety of tastes and dining preferences, ensuring as optimal an experience as possible. Spaghetti may very well still be on the menu—in fact, you may even end up choosing it—but you have a choice to select it, which makes all the difference.

This is precisely the active, engaging experience that the Cafeteria Learning model promotes. Cafeteria Learning brings together the best of the experiential, constructivist, and action learning approaches and bakes in an important brain-based twist: choice. What if instead of walking into a training event and seeing rows of chairs with an instructor waiting at the front of the room, your learners were surprised to find interactive stations stocked with hands-on materials? What if instead of sitting and listening to a lecturer read off words on presentation slides, your learners were free to explore and absorb the content at their own speed and direction? And what if instead of being given only one option for learning, your learners could choose from a variety of learner-centered activities, just like they might choose from a variety of food in a cafeteria?

Let Them Choose is written for you, the learning professional who is searching for another way to design learning experiences. Cafeteria Learning typically works best with what may be referred to as "soft skills" or "people skills" content such as communication, sales, time management, or goal setting. What makes this type of content work well with Cafeteria Learning is that it can be presented in a nonlinear way. That is, it doesn't matter what order the learner achieves the learning objectives, only that they are all met by the end of the learning experience. In contrast, "hard skills" training is intended to improve a learner's technical skill set in a very specific way. The Cafeteria Learning model could be applied to a training program for technical procedures, though how you structure and outline the activities around the learning objective might need more order.

Over the course of this book, we will present a start-to-finish guide on what Cafeteria Learning is and how to implement it within your organization.

In chapter 1, "How We Learn," we'll introduce research on how the brain learns best (perhaps unsurprisingly, it's the opposite of how many organizations structure their training). You'll learn why moving around a room and learning experientially is so much more powerful than sitting in your seat, how learners construct knowledge, and how choice enhances the learning process.

In chapter 2, "What Is Cafeteria Learning?" you'll gain an in-depth understanding of Cafeteria Learning and each of its components. You'll learn how Cafeteria Learning works, and the core components of a Cafeteria Learning workshop. And you'll see what it's like for a learner to move through a Cafeteria Learning experience.

Chapter 3, "Getting Buy-in for Cafeteria Learning," explores the process of getting organizational buy-in for your Cafeteria Learning program. You'll learn how Cafeteria Learning benefits the learner, the organization, and the learning professional.

Chapter 4, "Writing Cafeteria Learning Objectives," details a step-by-step tutorial on the art of writing Cafeteria Learning–specific learning objectives. You'll learn how to identify your three core learning objectives and write them in a manner that allows for sufficient choice.

Next, in chapter 5, "Designing Cafeteria Learning Activities," you'll discover the four-step process for designing Cafeteria Learning activities that revolve around each of your core learning objectives. You'll learn about the best way to brainstorm and select activities and why it's important to design activities that span various learning experiences to enhance the choice you offer your learners.

Chapter 6, "The Framework," covers the process for framing your content. You'll learn how to design a priming activity that engages learners from the start. You'll learn how to weave in foundational content that leads learners into the main activity workshop. And you'll learn how to bring your workshop to a close with a debriefing activity that helps your learners synthesize and reflect on what they've learned.

Chapter 7, "Facilitating Cafeteria Learning," shares tips and best practices for facilitating a successful Cafeteria Learning workshop. You'll learn how to prepare for facilitating a Cafeteria Learning workshop one month, one week, one day, and one hour before your workshop. You'll learn what you need to take into account when setting up your room and materials. And you'll learn the best way to introduce a Cafeteria Learning workshop and lead learners through the activities.

Chapter 8, "Measuring and Evaluating the Results," lays out helpful practices for evaluating your Cafeteria Learning workshop and gathering

valuable feedback and metrics after your workshop has come to a close. You'll learn that evaluating the results of Cafeteria Learning is just as important as measuring more traditional learning experiences.

Chapter 9, "Case Studies," details how organizations have successfully used Cafeteria Learning to deliver engaging workshops. Through case studies, you'll learn about the intended learning outcomes, activity examples, and the perspectives from participants and stakeholders on their experiences learning with this method.

Finally, chapter 10, "Cafeteria Learning Activities," provides a handpicked selection of our favorite Cafeteria Learning activities, which you can use as a starting point for your own design process.

We hope *Let Them Choose* will inspire you to take meaningful steps toward creating learning experiences in your organization that effectively harness the power of choice and ensure that each individual's learning needs are met. Cafeteria Learning is the model we've designed for achieving this goal. We hope you'll join us on our quest to transform workplace learning through the power of choice.

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WHAT IS CAFETERIA LEARNING?

Think of Cafeteria Learning as a complete dining experience rather than a grab-n-go meal. With Cafeteria Learning you begin with an appetizer (priming), move on to the main course (activities), and finish with dessert (debrief).

Cafeteria Learning workshops begin with a priming activity that engages learners and gets them thinking about the content. This not only prepares learners for the learning that's to come, but it's also a great way to involve learners from the get-go and make use of the often overlooked first few minutes of a workshop when learners are settling in.

Research shows that priming, or providing advance knowledge of the information to come, increases learners' abilities to retrieve this information in the future (Martin and Turennout 2002) and also activates an important problem-solving area of the brain (Carter, MacDonald, and Ursu 2000). "Priming works to retrieve information from memory when a priming stimulus is presented and sets off a chain of events in which one node of a concept is linked to another," wrote Dosher and Rosedale (1989). Ratcliff and McKoon (1988, 405) suggested that "if the prime is directly related to the target concept, the individual will have an easier time recalling the concept as a chunk of information."

The workshop officially begins with the main course, during which learners spend the most time freely choosing, exploring, and engaging

in learning activities at their own pace. Stations are set up around the room where learners get to decide which learning activities they want to participate in. Each activity is designed to provide the same content for learners to discover no matter which activity they choose. For the most part, the content, or knowledge, is in these learning activities. By taking a constructivist approach to learning, Cafeteria Learning allows learners to discover and construct their own knowledge as they complete the activities and interact with their colleagues and peers.

Lastly, each workshop ends with a dessert, or debriefing activity, that helps learners synthesize the content and reflect on what it means to them within the context of their day-to-day jobs. An effective debriefing, which facilitates collaborative reflection, can bridge the gap between the workshop content and applying learning back at work (Wick et al. 2006, 73).

The experience as a whole is exploratory, allowing learners to build, construct, and discover information and meaning for themselves rather than simply memorizing and reciting it. It emphasizes choice in activities that ultimately leads learners to the same learning outcome regardless of the activities they chose.

With Cafeteria Learning, we've carefully selected elements from each of the experiential, constructivist, and action learning theories, added in choice as a twist, and organized it all into an approach that encapsulates what we believe is the best of brain science and learning theory.

A Cafeteria Learning Story

"Not another training," you grumble to yourself as you prepare to facilitate your company's workshop Creating an Inclusive Workplace.

As a seasoned corporate trainer, who's been with the company for years, you know exactly what to expect: You'll spend an afternoon inside a too-warm, too-packed meeting room as you explain the importance of an inclusive workplace. Maybe you'll sprinkle in a few discussion questions for good measure, which participants will reluctantly volunteer to answer: Their boss is in the room, after all. They better look engaged.

All you can think about is the fact that you have more important things to do: Between managing day-to-day operations and preparing for

a critical quarter-end deadline, you're already squeezed for time. On top of everything else on your plate, your team is expanding and you're in the process of hiring a new consultant. You already know that having an inclusive workplace is one of the company values, and you will do your best to model it.

You review the facilitator guide. It's different. There will be interactive stations stocked with hands-on materials, and you're responsible for summarizing the priming activity and presenting foundational content for about 10 minutes of the allotted session time. You do a double take: Are those building bricks referenced as learning materials?

This couldn't be right.

You walk through the experience in your mind.

"Are you here for the Creating an Inclusive Workplace workshop?" you ask as participants arrive. You smile and direct them toward a table full of photos depicting a variety of people's faces.

You ask learners to pick a photo that appeals to them—any photo—and to use the first few minutes before the workshop begins to answer discussion questions that have been placed on their table with a partner.

Participants appear a tad nervous at first. It's much more comfortable to sit near the back of the room, listening to the lecture and occasionally taking some notes. But bit by bit, their curiosity helps them to overcome their nerves.

You imagine one of the learners sitting next to a manager from their department, saying good morning and agreeing to work together. One of the learners reads one of the provided discussion questions aloud: "Why do you think you picked the photo that you did?"

The learners had thought about why they picked it, but after reflecting for a moment, they realize that they'd selected a person who's just like them: Male. Caucasian. Similar in age. Do they do the same thing when choosing whom to engage with on their team? Although they'd never exclude anyone purposefully, it dawns on them for the first time that maybe they have an unconscious bias toward socializing and working with people who are similar. It's subtle and they mean no harm; it's just what comes naturally.

The learner thinks about Jenny, who's one of just a handful of women in the department, and wonders: Could this tendency to work more closely with the men on the team make Jenny feel excluded and undervalued?

"Ding!"

You ring a bell, signifying that the workshop is about to begin. The first five minutes of this experience has already sparked personal insights, and the workshop hasn't even officially started.

You begin, "Today we're using a learning technique called Cafeteria Learning. It's designed to give you the freedom to choose how you learn. Similar to a cafeteria, stations are set up around the room to offer you choices. You get to decide which learning activities you want to participate in. When it's time, you'll browse the activity menu (Figure 2-1), which lists your activity choices. First, let's talk a little bit about why we are here today, the expected learning outcome for the workshop, and what you will learn this morning."

"As you know fostering an inclusive workplace is one of our company values. I'd like to begin with a brief review of our organization's mission, vision, and values, and our philosophy around the importance of creating an inclusive workplace. Then I have just a couple of slides to show you."

After emphasizing the desired workshop outcomes and learning objectives, you continue, "Let's review your activity menu for today. It lists the learning activities you can select from during today's workshop."

You continue, "At the top of the menu are the three topics we are learning today, and under each topic there are three activities. You will choose one activity from each topic. The activities you choose are completely up to you. If you've completed one activity from each topic and you have extra time, feel free to choose additional activities.

"Don't worry about not learning something because you didn't complete all of the activities! Each activity has been designed to help you learn the same content within that topic, no matter which activities you choose.

Figure 2-1. Sample Activity Menu

Choose at Least One Activity From Each Topic Below. If Time Allows, You May Complete More.		
Understanding Me	Understanding You	Understanding Strategies
Identify your communication preferences.	Seek to understand others.	Consider differing perspectives.
❒ **Uniquely Me** Draw an image of yourself that reflects your communication style.	❒ **Telling My Story** Record yourself telling a story about your experience understanding others.	❒ **Case by Case** Read and discuss scenarios and then reveal the correct answers.
❒ **Who Am I?** Share facts about yourself for each communication style.	❒ **Stronger Together** Construct a puzzle as you consider strengths of people you work with.	❒ **Brick by Brick** Plan and then construct a stable bridge.
❒ **Dimensions of Me** Write facts about yourself that reflect your communication style.	❒ **Can't Judge a Book by Its Cover** Flip a book to learn about the unique qualities of others.	❒ **Communicate With Care** Write your reaction and response to a conversation.

"With that, take a moment to consider which activities interest you and make your selections. Then, you'll have a chance to participate at your own pace, and I'll let you know when you have 15 minutes left. Of course, I'll be checking in at each of the stations and available to answer any questions you may have."

You overhear a learner say to another, "This is going to be different." Although they aren't quite sure what to expect, they seem intrigued and also comforted by the fact that they're in control of their own learning.

Each activity menu is organized into three main topics, each of which has three related activities to choose from. Each topic and the three activities that relate to it is called a "learning topic."

You watch as participants head straight for their activities of choice. You notice one begins the "Brick by Brick" activity within the "Understanding Strategies" topic.

As you read deeper into the facilitator guide, you imagine the following scene:

The learner partners with Miguel from the finance department, whom she's never met before. "Whoever thought we'd get to play with building bricks at work?" she says to Miguel. "This is going to be fun!"

As they work together to build a unique structure, some differences in opinion arise; nevertheless, you can't help but notice how well Miguel's analytical mind complements Emily's: Her idea for the bridge is lofty and grand; his is sturdy, calculated, and realistic. Without her vision, the bridge would have lacked beauty and many value-added features. Without his analytical approach, however, the bridge would have been shoddy—it would have fallen to shambles. Realistically, she needed some healthy nuts-and-bolts perspective to make it work.

While answering the discussion questions, it dawns on them just how critical it is to communicate and share these unique perspectives, resources, and skills in the workplace, both inside the department and out. They discuss how they might work with other departments more closely so everyone can bring a unique perspective to the table and help solve problems affecting both departments—in the past they've always tried to solve problems individually or with their own teams.

You begin to think about the candidates you've been interviewing to fill your department's open position: Sure, you relate more easily to people who think like you, but could it be beneficial to bring someone on board with a completely different set of perspectives and skills?

Next, you move on to understanding the "Telling My Story" activity within the "Understanding You" topic. Using a tablet, learners record themselves relating a story about a time in which they witnessed or experienced inclusion not being valued. They also have the opportunity to view stories recorded by colleagues.

Learners sit down at the table, read the story prompt card, and record their story. When they're finished, they can review the other recordings. One such recording recounts an employee's personal story of moving to the United States from India:

> "I was in one of my first meetings with my prior company, and not everyone could understand my accent. I thought I had important contributions to make, but no one asked for clarification or further explanation—most of the time my comments were just skipped over or dismissed. It was easy to feel like my voice wasn't valued or heard. Eventually I just decided to stop contributing."

You think about this story and it triggers important questions and insights for you: Inside and outside of formal meetings, how are you making sure everyone on your team is given the chance to speak up and that they all feel heard? You realize that, purposefully or not, you tend to interact more with people who are similar to you. Why not purposefully create an environment of inclusion?

As learners are engrossed in the activities, participating in meaningful discussions, and reflecting on how they will behave differently and apply what they have learned to encourage inclusion on their team, you begin to understand the difference this method of learning provides. As a trainer you're no longer the "sage on the stage" but rather a facilitator to ensure that the framework is set for personal, meaningful learning.

As you near the end of the workshop, you bring the learners back together as a group to debrief each activity. You ask learners to volunteer to share some of their experiences and tie their insights back to the

intended lesson for each topic. Listening to other's insights provides learners with even more to think about and apply.

New relationships with people within the company are formed, and initial nervousness has faded away. What was once abstract has suddenly become relevant, real, and meaningful. Learning that once felt mandatory and one-sided now feels like a choice. You provided the framework and foundational content while the learners constructed their own meaning and ideas that they'll apply, ones that are relevant to their particular experience and workplace.

At the close of the workshop, you invite learners to reflect on a final question, "Knowing what you know now, what will you do differently in your job?" They write their answer down on a pair of sticky notes: one to stick onto a collaborative board along with those of the rest of the group and one to take with them.

You think about what your answer would be, "Actively seek to embrace rather than ignore differences," which further crystallizes your understanding of how you can apply these concepts to your work. You thought you got it before, but now you really get it.

As you close the facilitator guide, you wonder, "Why didn't we do a workshop with activity choices like this 10 years ago?"

Summary

Cafeteria Learning takes the best of what we learned in our research and experience and rolls it all together into one simple framework with choice at its core. Cafeteria Learning consists of three main components: an appetizer (priming activity), a main course (choose, explore, engage activities), and a dessert (debrief). Stations are set up around the room, and learners get to decide which learning activities they want to participate in. Each activity is designed to provide the same content for learners to discover no matter which activity they choose. By taking a constructivist approach to learning, Cafeteria Learning allows learners to discover and build their own knowledge as they complete the activities and interact with their colleagues and peers.