



Trainers – Who Do You Represent?

Training changes people's lives, and as trainers we are responsible for the direction in which this change goes. When working with participants in a training situation our work is always guided – consciously or unconsciously - by our values and beliefs and by the information and concepts we choose to use. But also the policies and values of the organisation we are representing form the framework of the training. So, can training ever be neutral? What if there is a conflict between our own values and those of the organisation we are working for as a trainer? These are some of the questions of relevance for trainers in all training contexts that the author raises in this article.

I often sit in discussions and meetings and use the phrase 'wearing my trainers hat...', or 'wearing my director's hat...'. I then go on to explain something from a particular viewpoint, sometimes that of the trainer, sometimes that of the director or participant. By referring to a hat, I am making clear which point of view I am representing and it is quite normal for me to represent more than one. I use the phrase in particular when referring to different organisations I am involved in.

The enlightened organisation will of course recognise personal needs and allow for flexibility where they are not fully in tune with what was planned at the start. Enlightened organisations will work with their people to assess training need and find the right training or development opportunity to meet it. The need for careful selection of course participants can't be stressed enough, but sometimes it is not possible to control who turns up and what baggage they bring with them. My training as a trainer always emphasised the belief that all situations have potential for all involved to learn. So, if I represent the training profession it is easier to mould the course to meet the needs of the participants. If I am more a representative of the organisation that arranged the course then do I feel compromised or pressured to work in a particular way?

by Jonathan Bowyer



Thinking Hats

Dr. Edward de Bono is one of the world's foremost thinkers about 'thinking', which he defines as "the operating skill through which intelligence acts upon experience". In 1985 he published his book 'Six thinking Hats' (1) in which he described six metaphorical hats which people take on or off to indicate which type of thinking they are using. The white hat indicates factual objectivity, red indicates emotions and feelings, black indicates judgement and caution, yellow indicates positive, logical thinking, green indicates creativity and blue indicates overview and process control thinking. The blue hat is particularly interesting for the trainer because its role is to identify and coordinate the other different thinking roles. Thinking with the blue hat on involves summing up, solving problems and getting to conclusions. As trainers we often fulfil that role.

If we put on our blue thinking hats, does that mean that we represent anyone or anything? Can we claim neutrality as a trainer? Is it possible to be totally objective in the training situation, or are we always in some way representing someone? If a participant joins a course does she automatically assume that the trainers views are those of the organisation who sent her? Does the Centre or training organisation check on the views of trainers before employing them?

It seems to me that the answers to these questions are not 'yes' or 'no', but 'it depends'. It depends more on how we train rather than on the subject matter. Where the training role is mainly about facilitating a learning process, then we are wearing a blue thinking hat; we are asking questions without giving an opinion, and we are able, most of the time, to remain neutral. The time inevitably comes however when the facilitator has to arbitrate, to give an opinion and to express a view. When working with young people, the chances of them looking to the trainer for an opinion is higher than for older groups, and we need to be even more careful. It is possible to be a representative of a particular view or approach unintentionally.

When I worked in a training centre with unemployed young people, there was often conflict between the needs of the group of young trainees and demands of the government programme, which had paid for them to come on the course. Likewise when working with managers, there is a common mismatch between the training needs of the individual managers and the demands of the employer who has arranged the course. It often puts the trainer in a difficult position: Do we look to meet the needs of individuals or do we continue to deliver what has been paid for?





We can look at representation on two levels; one of values, policies and quality, and the other of information, theories and models.

Values, policies and quality

On the first level, we represent ourselves – our cultures, our beliefs, our politics. When we agree with the values, culture, beliefs and politics of what we might call the ‘provider stakeholders’ then it is fairly straightforward. By provider stakeholders I mean those people who have in some way contributed to the provision of the training event and have an interest in its success. They include the training organisation, the funders and the commissioning organisation. We can present views and ‘be ourselves’ with the confidence that we are backed up by the organisation. The organisation too can be confident that we will represent their position accurately. It is when our views differ that conflict can arise. How do I represent the views of the ‘provider stakeholders’ and maintain my own integrity?

One dictionary definition of the verb ‘to represent’ suggests that as representatives we are the embodiment of something, a symbol or portrayal of something or someone. In political terms, representatives do more than portray the views of their constituents; they fight for them with energy and commitment. In this sense the need for unity of values and purpose between ‘provider stakeholders’ and the trainer is essential – or do we believe that a person from one political or religious persuasion can truly represent the views or values or policies of someone from another? The lawyer in court has to represent their client and do the best for them – he relies on the judicial system and puts his trust in the information and plea given by his client. But how does a defence lawyer represent a client she believes is guilty?

It is interesting to consider further the political element of our role as trainers in Europe. There is a lot of training in Europe that is provided by organisations like the Council of Europe and the Youth Forum, with strong political agendas. There are many people who are politically active and if they do not take on a training role, they certainly take on an influencing role in the arena of European youth work. A significant question here is, can we be both trainers and politicians. Is there a conflict between the two? Is it OK for trainers to use their position in the training room to further a political campaign or viewpoint?

There may be other conflicts too, when we switch allegiances. Perhaps we start training as part of an organisation, or we are trained as trainers within a not-for-profit or NGO context but then go on to work for a commercial organisation or as freelancers. Does this have an effect on what or how you represent the provider stakeholders? Do you promote yourself as a trainer or do you promote the organisation that is paying you?

We are often required to represent the professional values of ‘provider stakeholders’ without even discussing what they actually are. Some place great weight on ‘political correctness’ as a measure of this, where others might be more concerned with a genuine demonstrable care for the learners and the ability to create a ‘nice’ environment. Much of this can be summed up in the word ‘quality’, and I would assume that we would all want to be known as high quality trainers. All provider stakeholders would want that to be a description of their provision too, so there is one piece of common ground for us to start from.

The recent SALTO training courses run by the European Commission through its SALTO-YOUTH centres (2) have been developed with the specific objective of improving quality in European youth projects. Quality here is about safety, learning, inclusiveness, planning, preparation – and the list goes on. So do we have clear views about what makes a high quality trainer? Do you think you are one? And if so, how do you make sure you are working for a high-quality training provider? If you are not sure about that then do you really want to be representing them in the training room? How, also, do you ensure that you are (and that you continue to be) a quality trainer? How do you get the necessary experience and feedback and how do you keep up to date?

Information and ideas

We represent training providers at the level of values, policies and purpose, whatever the approach and whatever the material. But there is a second level: When we present the work of others we have some further considerations: How accurate are we being with their ideas? How much credit are we giving to the originator? Do we endorse a view simply by presenting it or can we remain neutral and simply suggest that the learners think about it and make their own judgement?

Much of the material we present is developed by the process of presenting it and gaining feedback from our participants. Theories and models in particular, but simulations, games and exercises too, are usually ‘works-in-progress’. It seems that ideas have to be published before they are attributed to one person, but the reality is that they will usually have had the input of many people before and will be adapted and developed by many people after publication. We need to be sure that we are not presenting material as something new when in fact we are re-presenting the work of others. Again, the integrity with which we use the work of others reflects on the organisation we are working for.

Another consideration is that some of us earn part of our living from presenting particular material in a particular way. Training games are the most common example here.



There are always variations but somewhere someone took the time to organise things into a useable format and make it available for others to use – most often perhaps through being a course participant! A colleague of mine has packaged a number of outdoor training exercises in such a well organised and attractive way that I no longer want to spend time collecting the various pieces of equipment together myself. When I do it, the exercises look like I have used bits of old junk but when I use his they look purpose-made, clean and effective. The exercises are not new to me at all but he has taken the time to make them easy to use and professional to look at – he has developed the quality of the experience for his learners and I want to make use of that.

But do we automatically assume that we can use the work of others? That they have freely given their work to the collective body of knowledge and methods and that it is now open for us to use it? If that is the case then what are our responsibilities to our other colleagues in the field? As we stand up in the training room are we representing them too? Are we representing the formal or informal pool of trainers who each contribute a part of their thinking every time they run an exercise or present a model?

Summing up

In this article I have asked lots of questions and maybe not answered very many. It is clearly not a simple issue but there some key conclusions we can make about trainers as representatives.

- ✓ First we represent ourselves – our personal integrity is an asset and we need to be sure that we promote it - rather than compromise it - by our own behaviour or that of colleagues or employers.
- ✓ Second we represent our profession and a huge range of thinkers, researchers and other stakeholders who allow their ideas to be freely used and developed.
- ✓ Third we represent those who trust us to contribute to the development of their staff, volunteers or organisations.

Training is a diverse activity. It means different things to different people but common to all trainers is their involvement in a process of learning and development. Training changes people's lives and as trainers we have a big influence on what form that change takes. We choose the values and principles we represent; the ideas and the concepts; the information and the data. It's a big responsibility – but then it's a great job!

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Reference 1:

Edward de Bono (1985) Six Thinking Hats, Little, Brown and Company

Reference 2:

SALTO YOUTH is short for the Support for Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for the YOUTH programme of the European Commission. More details can be found at www.salto-youth.net

Are you interested in the issue of ownership of training concepts and methods? Then have a look at Marker; "Where do methods come from?" in Coyote issue n° 5.