DSG Part 4: Classes that inform and excite - but make sure you read the room!

I created classes, informed our libraries, and made flyers for our libraries to use in marketing the classes to their patrons. The libraries would book a class, say, "Computer Basic: Learn the Mouse!" and they would write down those who were interested in taking the class. I would have a handout created, to use as my outline for the workshop, and I'd show up with the computers and my handouts ready to go at the right time. Classes were scheduled for 2-hour blocks, and, depending on the overall enthusiasm in the room (both mine and the students') it might drag a bit, or it might go so fast I thought we'd all get whiplash (I had one student actually gasp when I announced that we only had 10 minutes left. She came up to me after, explaining that she was actually worried she might fall asleep; she actually couldn't *believe* the time went so fast! We laughed!)

So, I worked and taught classes as I developed them; I figured I'd start with what I thought people needed to know in order to use computers and then fan out from there. That's how the handouts worked: They functioned as my plan for the class, but you might be familiar with the military saying: "No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy." (Helmuth Von Moltke) In my case, the "battle" was the patrons' questions. This was fine by me!

In the beginning, there were lots of edits to my handouts and classes. People would ask questions I hadn't considered, or I had brushed off as "too simple" (learn this now: it's better to explain something "by the numbers," or in simple, step-by-step terms, rather than use concepts that are too large or overarching. The *KISS* Principle works well, and most of the time, it serves as your friend).

I also figured out very quickly that the general rule of lectures works wonders, too. That is:

1. Tell people what you're going to say or instruct on during the session
2. Instruct on those items you just told them you were going to
3. Recap what you instructed during the session

In this manner, classes went fairly smoothly. After doing a quick introduction of myself, I'd run through the workshop. All of my class handouts had concrete objectives (see number one above), they had both screen shots/pictures and instructions (see number two) of the specific things they were learning, and at the end of class, as they filled out the evaluations, I'd do a quick recap of the class and all that they learned (number three). Keeping some blank space on the handouts was also useful because students could fill in some of their own notes.

Editing class content was of no concern to me. I was not "proud" of my classes, as if I thought they needed *no* improvement. The handouts were edited frequently to include ideas I had overlooked. I was also happy to cater to different questions during class, and if I could answer them, so much the better. Questions started *pouring* in during the workshops.

Remember, my biggest challenge was learning the art of the *pause*. Remember, I can still talk the ears off a corn field, so the idea of *not talking* was foreign and a bit uncomfortable. Remember, I was and still am enthusiastic about computers and mobile devices. Also remember that the class enthusiasm *feeds mine*, and the more enthusiasm, the more we *all* talked during class.

This is a recipe for disaster as far as controlling the class and reading the room.

Classes started wandering into deep waters that were beyond the general skill level of the patrons, or worse yet, they started wandering *way too far off the topic*. Oh, boy, I was in trouble and needed to get control of my workshops! Several evaluations came in from the students that were less than stellar. This was a great wake up call for me.

It took me a *long time* to learn to say, "No." Of course, that's not the word I used, but over time I learned to say, "That's beyond the scope of *this* class," or, "Hang on, that's a great question, we can talk at the break. Remind me, because I can be forgetful!" Another very useful phrase I learned to use was, "OK, that's great! Getting back to the handout…." I used the handout as an excuse to reign in some students, and also learned to say, "I believe you. You're right, but I'm getting ahead of myself." By using the "I" statement, I could generally get people to quiet down a little and then we all could get back on the right track for the class.

Once, and only once, thank goodness, I could not get a student to follow the class. She was so disruptive that I was forced to take a break and ask the staff to get her out of the *building*. She was not mean or uncooperative in class, but she was extremely fidgety. I mean, beyond what might be remotely acceptable even in an adaptive learning situation. Please remember, these are freely offered classes that students *voluntarily attend*.

Class was scheduled for 2 hours and I managed to get everyone, including her, through the first 50 minutes. I said we could take a break (I usually did not take a break in a 2 hour class) and spoke with one staff member at the front desk. This student was beyond "reasonable accommodation," and besides, I felt I *had made one by keeping her there* for the first part of class. That lady agreed with me, and would inform the student that she could leave.

This was agreed upon by us at the desk, but a different staff member, who was not privy to the student's actions in class, nor did she know about our conversation at the main desk, insisted the student must remain in the class for the entire time.

I am not kidding when I say *everyone's spirits fell when the student came back in the room*. Mine included. You could *see* it happening.

I try to teach everyone. I try to remain patient, but this was beyond my powers of "classroom control." I had been training adults for years by this point, and thought I had seen just about everything, but this was a new curve. I had to take another "break" and talk to the new staff member, the other staff member, and even the manager of the site. I said, in no uncertain terms, the student *must go*.

When the student got called out of the room, and everyone saw how she was acting, she was gone. I spoke to both staff members and the manager, apologized for having to remove her, and *they apologized to me*. The student could barely stand up straight or speak a coherent sentence.

The class continued on a much better note after that. I'm also happy to say that the same student came back after a few weeks, took a different class, and was *totally fine*. I have no idea what was going on that first day, but I was very happy she was able to finish the second class and be successful.

Fortunately, again, this was *once* in over 20 years of training. It still took a lot for me to ask for the student's removal, and I felt deflated in having to do it. I work very hard at training, and I look at my students a lot, searching for clues to interest, engagement, and disengagement. I come out of workshops drained, because of the energy it takes for me to balance everything. Please don't get me wrong, I greatly enjoy training and consider it a privilege to do so. I have said before that the worst day training is still better than the best days I've had working other jobs. There will always be ups and downs, but I am fortunate to be able to train people on a tool that is here to stay. Computers and the Internet have changed my life, and I'm able to help change other people's lives, one at a time!