

Themed Training & Creativity

You Too Are Creative!

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HR professionals must model the ethical behavior expected of all employees. Respecting the copyrights of others is, thus, essential - regardless of whether you would be "caught" or not. Commercial training materials and simulations, however, could be costly - especially if you work for a small or a not-for-profit business.

I often wonder if the impulse to "copy" existing training materials does not stem from an innate fear of creativity. I hear students say, in the first day of classes: "I am not creative" or "I am not an idea person." By the end of the semester, however, "I AM CREATIVE!" becomes the collective mantra. Even the "non creative souls" are ready to develop out of the box training programs involving "themes," simulations, and other experiential activities.

Fear not. YOU TOO ARE CREATIVE. You might simply need to tap into your special source of creativity. For instance:

- **THE FACILITATOR:** Maybe you are terrific as a group facilitator - and are thus able to capitalize on the creative juices of your peers! If you are a FACILITATION GURU, remember to bring people together whenever you have a creative project. You don't need to come up with the ideas in the first place - you just need to capture the ideas of the group!
- **THE LISTENER:** Are you a good listener? Are you particularly strong during one-on-one conversations? Use your listening powers to capture inspiration from your peers.
- **THE RESEARCHER:** Do you enjoy reading? Then check out the academic sources and journals. Creativity may come more easily once you feel comfortable with your content.
- **THE PARENT:** I have received powerful contributions from my family. My daughter, in particular, has given me fantastic ideas over the years. Talk to your kids!
- **THE OBSERVER:** Pay attention! You can get great ideas from classic myths, children's games, movies, and books. Look for "themes" as you watch movies or visit your favorite museum on a weekend. Let dinosaurs and fairy tales talk to you!

Coming up with a "training theme" has been particularly valuable to me. Themes have helped me build "spy adventure" team building programs, "medical mystery" time management sessions and "Knights of the Round Table" leadership development workshops. Why does "themed training" help? Mostly, because themes provide designers with ideas for promotional pieces, training activities, and follow up processes. The theme itself may "stir up" your creative juices. "Thinking outside the box" may become natural.

Getting Started

Themed programs are no different from other well-designed programs in the *basics*. First you rely on a good need analysis to decide on a list of measurable objectives. Next, you figure out your resources - how much time do you have to plan? What program length can your audience tolerate? Finally, armed with measurable objectives and an idea of your resources, it's time to hunt for learning events that will help you reach each of your objectives.

Here's where themed programs are different from the ordinary: All learning events will need to match a certain theme. Anything "out of theme" - even a short video or vignette - will take away some of the magic. That can be tricky, especially if you don't have a ton of time.

Here are three short cuts:

1. **Adapt.** If you already have a solid (albeit a tad boring) program, don't toss it - just adapt it, by keeping the content and adjusting the activities (see some ideas below).
2. **Reuse.** Purchase several sets of well-known games such as "Yatsee" or "Pass the Pigs" as bases for your instructional games. Of course, the game pieces must match the theme as well (for instance, I might use "Pass the Pigs" in a program with an animal theme!). Legos® and similar building block games provide me with endless possibilities!
3. **Compartmentalize.** I often have a "prop" such as a hat or dark glasses (whatever matches my theme), which I wear when I'm "in theme." Then I tell participants that once I take off that "prop" we're back to "real life." This gimmick allows me to still use some traditional activities while keeping the theme alive most of the program.

Adaptation time

We all have our "favorite" activities - these are frames we use over and over in different training programs. I'm not necessarily talking about spectacular ideas - just your run of the mill group discussions, role-plays, and lecturettes. How do you adapt them to your "theme"?

Adapting traditional activities to a theme requires some creativity and a lot of fun. There are no clear rules, but here are some examples of what I could do with a "murder mystery" program:

1. **Icebreaker:** if participants were simply going to introduce themselves by sharing "something different about them" (a fairly common way of starting a program) how about asking them to introduce themselves by sharing their favorite detective story character?
2. **Group discussions:** rather than giving the groups a short list of questions to answer, how about having each group become a "team of detectives" who must guess the answers the other groups will give?
3. **Role plays:** instead of a traditional role play in which participants are "John" or "Mary", give people real detective names and badges - and ask them to practice whatever skill you are teaching (listening, questioning, etc.) "in character."

4. **General recap:** imagine that at the end of the day you typically ask participants to “come up with their most important lessons.” How about telling participants that throughout the day they will need to collect “clues” to the final mystery? The “clues” can be your top lessons, your “final mystery” can be the most important lesson taught in the program.

Props and Scenery

One thing that really helps in themed programs is to “create an ambiance.” Think Broadway! For instance, if you want to stage a murder mystery you may decorate the walls with old detective pictures; put detective-style props on the tables (magnifying glasses, pictures, digital prints, etc.); perhaps even dress up as a detective for starters.

Last weekend I showed up to my Instructional Design graduate class in full “Chef garb” (I wore an apron and a chef hat). In another training program I dressed up as Queen Guinevere for the graduation ceremony - and “knighted” all participants! It makes for great fun and participants are unlikely to forget your training.

At the simplest level, you will want to “theme up” your power point presentation with appropriate pictures, fonts, and colors. Special foods (decorated cookies, maybe?) and utensils add to the fun and to the illusion.

Following up

Themed programs have built in ideas to follow up and reinforce the learning. Themed posters, postit notes, buttons, and other gadgets can carry messages from the program. You can use the same theme in follow up memos, follow up evaluation forms, and even a follow up module for the same training!

The message here is - you *can* create your own stuff! And then you'll be the one worrying about others copying it rather than the other way round. So get your traditional programs out of their dusty covers and... theme up!

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Would you like to see how we can dress up traditional topics into a fun “theme” scenario? Then come to our upcoming (November 2nd) HR Development Day sponsored by Drake University and the Central Iowa SHRM! Several area subject matter experts will introduce serious HR case studies on diversity, compensation and benefits, employment law, human resource development, and risk management. This was designed to be an interactive day (you'll get to discuss each case before the

expert "solves it"). Further, we should have a lot of fun with a "game show" theme. For more information, go to <http://ci.shrm.org/events/2011/11/professional-development-day>