

Tips, Tools, Techniques and Other Tantalizing Tidbits: Now For Some “Aha’s” By Harold D. Stolovitch

This is the third and final installment of this three part “Tips” series of articles. To read the first two, click [here](#). This concluding piece focuses on creating learner *Aha’s* – moments of sudden insights.

To boost learning effectiveness, instructional designers must be able to create activities that capture learner attention and trigger a surprising, yet important, piece of learning that is likely to remain with the learner perhaps forever. The *Aha* activities can also drive home a key instructional point or generate a worthwhile discovery. Rather than talk about *Aha* activities, let’s experience them.

Through a Series of Personal Choices, the Learner Makes a Discovery

You are designing a training session for instructors on what makes for effective learning and what doesn’t. You develop a simple activity entitled: *What Works for Me*. You present a table such as the one below:

What Works for Me	
<p>You have participated in a great number of training sessions. Some of the things instructors did helped you learn; others didn’t. The table below presents you with pairs of statements. Each begins with, “I learn better when...” Choose from Column A or Column B for each pair what works better for you. Be totally honest with yourself in making each choice.</p> <p>I learn better when...</p>	
Column A	Column B
<input type="checkbox"/> an instructor who has lots of knowledge about something explains and describes it to me in detail.	<input type="checkbox"/> I dialogue with my instructor who has lots of knowledge and ask questions about what I need to know.
<input type="checkbox"/> I observe a demonstration as I listen to the instructor.	<input type="checkbox"/> I get involved and try things out during a demonstration as the instructor guides me.
<input type="checkbox"/> I attend a lecture in which the instructor presents information to me.	<input type="checkbox"/> I attend a session during which the instructor engages me in two-way interaction.
<input type="checkbox"/> I see what’s in it for the organization in doing the job the way it is presented.	<input type="checkbox"/> I see what’s in it for me in doing the job the way it is presented.
<input type="checkbox"/> I am shown several times how a procedure is done, then I practice.	<input type="checkbox"/> I get to try out a procedure for myself right from the start and receive continuous feedback.

When learners are asked to make choices like these, as they ponder, two phenomena occur. First, they reflect and choose based on their personal (and hence meaningful) experiences. Secondly, through their own choices, a pattern emerges which reveals some truth or principle which becomes an *Aha* (a meaningful insight) for them. This type of activity leads to self-evident conclusions, which, during the debriefing, easily transform into rules for action. In the example above, when we have used this activity, 95% of the learners check off most or even all of the Column B items. They themselves generate the data. They reach their own conclusions. Need one say more?

The Guessing Game

You are most likely a perfect candidate for the next *Aha* activity if you have not yet read my *Telling Ain't Training* book. The question is, "Do you know your learner?" Every salesperson learns very early that Rule 1 of selling is: Know your customer. As instructional professionals, shouldn't we know our learners?

So, tell me, does each one of our human senses process sensory information equally (same volume of information in any given unit of time)? Or does each sense have a different processing capacity by volume of information? What percentage of all the information we receive in a unit of time do we obtain from each sense when all senses of our sense are functioning normally and we are in a full sensory environment such as in the picture below? (Clue: This is a "species" thing. All humans are extremely similar in this respect when there are no individual sensory limitations.)



So, place your percentage beside each sense in the drawing on the next page. The total of all your percentages should add up to 100%.



Do not read any further until you have written your responses.

When I use this exercise with learners, usually training practitioners, their answers range from 20% for each sense to anything and everything imaginable. I ask a few individuals to share their numbers. Then, we reveal the answers: Sight – 83%; hearing – 11%; smell – 3.5%; touch – 1.5%; taste – 1%. Most of the respondents are way off in their numbers, but the *Aha's* that occur are many.

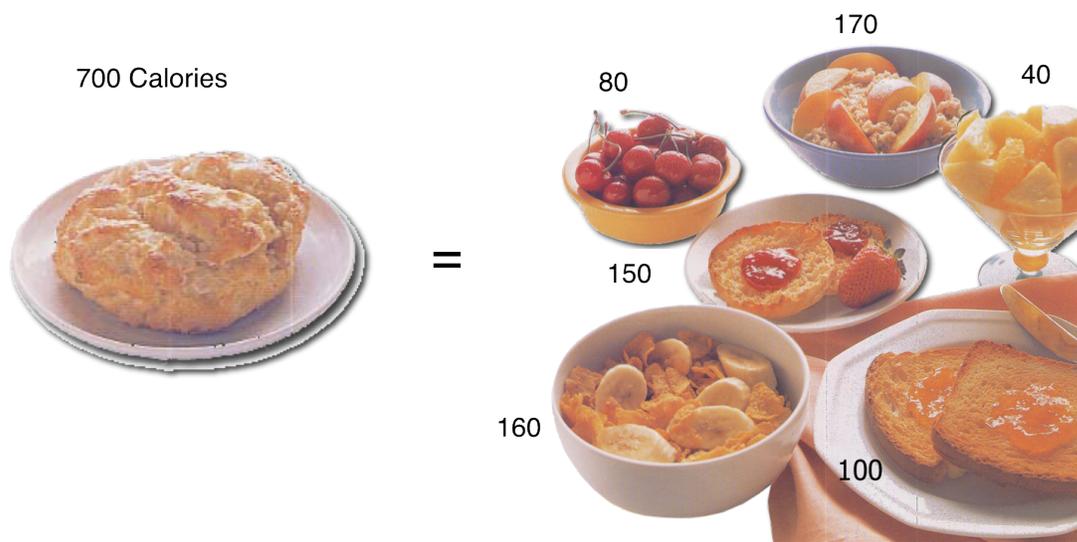
Next step, a debriefing on how poorly we know our learners in terms of their information processing abilities. We then use what we have just learned as a launch pad into more discoveries about perception, information processing and knowledge acquisition.

The Dramatic Demo

You want to drive home a point...dramatically. Imagine that the topic is wise food choices, part of a weight control program you are designing. Your current focus is on *daily food selections*. You present the image below (in color, of course) while stating: "This is a scone from a popular coffee shop. How many calories does it have? Also, are there other easy, tasty alternatives?" You have participants suggest the caloric content of the scone and some available healthy alternatives.



After a few moments of discussion, disclose (with fanfare), the following:



Talk about dramatic impact and learning. Since I encountered these images in a book on food choices, I have never ordered a scone again.

What Can We Conclude About *Aha* Activities?

Sometimes, as instructional designers, we are so task-focused that we forget the numerous useful ways we can deliver key points – *Aha*'s – that resonate with learners and help them retain the learning long after they have departed from the training event. Some, we can build in through practice exercises. Others, we can make happen through challenging mini activities that help create new insights. Search for opportunities to insert these in your designs. They are fun, long lasting and often bring to life everything else you have created for them.