

Ideas from the Front Lines

Effective FluencyBuilding™ Design and Coaching for Classroom Programs

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Background

We've recently collected from our clients and partners some common objections or obstructions that they have encountered in implementing fluency-based training and coaching programs. Issues include that some learners do not like using practice cards or do not think they help learning, that practice on content prior to classroom sessions on the material is not useful, and that fluency practice is just "memorizing" and therefore not "real learning."

These comments prompted us to speak with some of our most experienced implementers of fluency-based programs, fluency coaches who execute and modify learning programs day-to-day on the front lines. The following is a summary of what we heard.

Setting High Expectations

There must be a commitment by the trainers to *changing from a classroom to a learning gym*. This is about how the classroom looks, feels, and sounds – high activity, very high energy, fun, sometimes noisy. This expectation needs to be clear and explicit from the beginning for both trainers and trainees.

"This won't be AT ALL like traditional training. It will be difficult, but worth it." It is impossible to over-state this to trainees from the beginning. They must understand that they'll have to work hard and to make measurable progress each day to keep up with the pace. The expectation is to genuinely achieve *fluent* knowledge, and that's hard work. *But it's also a requirement for success on the job.*

Introducing Fluency Practice Cards

Although using cards to gain fluency on elementary facts, definitions, associations, and the like *in advance* of classroom lectures/discussions can be very beneficial, trainees might resist practicing or consider it too "rote" if they don't really understand the relevance of the cards content when they're asked to begin practice. It might work better, especially for groups new to fluency-based learning, to introduce card sets and similar exercises closer to when the topics will be introduced. In one new hire training program, for example, coaches give trainees a card set the night before its content will be introduced and ask them to review the cards – to start working with the content a little, before officially beginning practice on the next day.

It's also good to introduce the idea of "fundamentals" as in basketball or other athletic events. The "wax on, wax off" story from *The Karate Kid* movie is a good example of how fluency practice works. One of our clients shows that video during the first class to illustrate the point. In the movie, the martial arts master introduces practice of a "wax on, wax off" motion for days before showing the boy that it is an essential move in karate. Many people recall that movie, and the example has a lot of face value. The idea is that we need to work on elements before putting them together, and that we can practice fundamentals before completely understanding or experiencing the whole performance.

Selecting Content for Fluency Practice Cards

Things that can turn off new trainees to practice cards include when there are *too many* cards or when the content doesn't seem essential. If the value of the content is not obvious, trainees may not engage. So what's on the cards must have face value, or be shown to have value when introduced. In one case, call center representatives must use screen codes to access information in a customer database. Achieving fluency on these codes makes a huge difference in initial ramp-up on the system. By showing trainees how they will need to use the codes before asking them to begin practice, trainers establish face value relevance. Think of similar ways to establish the importance of specific content in fluency exercises.

Having too many cards is a problem. As training designers, don't go "card happy." Use practice cards only for essential need-to-know "factoid" information, and introduce them over time. Balance the use of cards with other types of exercises (e.g., Hear/Say, See/Mark, Free/Abbreviate, etc.) One of the most important parts of editing practice cards is to delete all but those that are essential prerequisites for important on-the-job performance.

Creating "Need to Know"

Especially with tenured employees who think they already know a lot, or with fairly sophisticated new hires, you need to establish "need to know" before they will commit wholeheartedly to practice. One effective method is to administer a timed fluency test first, so they can see how slow and inaccurate they actually are on what are obviously important, basic facts and definitions, etc. Once they see that they really DON'T know the information as well as they had previously thought, give them cards and other exercises that will help them master the content covered on the tests. Again, the content of both tests and exercises must have *face validity* – it must be obvious that trainees will need to achieve fluency on this information in order to perform well on the job.

Weaving Fluency Practice into Everything

Although some organizations effectively use "fluency lab" periods interspersed with conventional classroom activities to allow for individualized, self-paced practice, it turns out that more trainers have recently been successful by weaving practice into the fabric of everything in a classroom program. This allows them to maintain high motivation, to constantly monitor and provide feedback to individuals and the group about how they're doing, and to make appropriate course corrections on the spot.

The best classroom fluency coaches mix lecture/discussion with 6 or 7 (or more) different types of drills in every hour or shorter period of time. They never allow the energy to lag, or let trainees get off the “edge of their seats.” This turns out to be the most successful approach according to experienced classroom fluency coaches.

Plan classes in sequences of 10-minute intervals in advance, mixing brief presentations and discussions and lots of different types of fluency practice. Use practice sheets, cards, Free/Abbreviate, Hear/Say, and other learning channels and exercise types to cover the same information. Keep up the variety. Also prepare back-up or “change-up” exercises just in case something you planned isn’t working, or in case the energy lags. This will enable you to keep trainees on their toes and regain focused attention if it wanes. Sprinkle 1 or 2-minute Free/Abbreviate timings each half hour or less, requiring trainees to write down everything they’ve learned that hour, morning, day, or for the whole program. Count and share ideas on white boards or flip charts, and constantly push trainees to recall more, comparing performance on each timing with that on previous ones.

Group Hear/Say exercises can be particularly effective, according to one of our most successful fluency coaches. Ask the group questions and prompt group responses – what’s sometimes called “choral responding” (like when a chorus sings *together*.) This is a great way to keep energy up. Shouting answers is OK, and keeps the activity vigorous, even boisterous. One way to be sure that individuals aren’t hanging back, waiting to see what others say, is to work one side of a room against the other. First ask one side a question, then the other. Then ask, “Who’s louder?” in a way that encourages everyone in each group to respond together. Pay attention to who’s responding and who’s not, and give frequent immediate feedback. Do Hear/Say practice on the content of cards, job aids, or other information that trainees need to master.

Do Hear/Say with *individuals* mixed in with the group responding. Pick out individuals, asking them specific questions, with the stipulation that no one can help them. This puts people on the spot, but if you do it rapidly, allowing lots of opportunities and paying attention to each individual’s stage of learning, you can keep it positive. Go back to the same individuals repeatedly and unpredictably, so people always have to stay alert. Be careful not to be overbearing or embarrassing. Keep up the pace, and make it fun.

Providing Frequent Performance Feedback

One of the advantages of the FluencyBuilding approach is that there are frequent opportunities to measure and provide or obtain feedback. Each exercise in the classroom is an opportunity for both trainees and trainers to gauge how it’s going. With well-designed exercises that mirror the important performance requirements of the job, there’s very little excuse for either trainees or trainers not knowing how things are going from day to day in multi-day training program.

Experienced fluency coaches emphasize that it’s essential in classroom programs to give at least *informal* feedback to each individual *every day* on how they’re doing, whether they’re keeping up, etc. Provide more formal feedback at least once or twice per week making comments to

individuals during breaks about measured performance on specific exercises, etc. You decide how best to accomplish this, but frequent feedback about performance on exercises and level of participation is very important.

Feedback works best if supervisors/managers are directly involved in the training on a daily basis so that the feedback has the weight of job performance feedback, and cannot be dismissed by trainees as mere “trainers” feedback.

An important success factor is for managers to be directly involved in stating expectations and stressing that performance on fluency activities will directly affect job success. (One of our most successful client organizations even uses a sort of “good cop, bad cop” approach, in which the business manager begins new hire training with a friendly but informative statement of expectations, and his top manager delivers a more “stern” version at several points during the initial days. However you accomplish this objective, it should be clear to trainees that the people who will be managing them on the job are aware during training of how they’re doing. Ideally trainees receive direct feedback during multi-day training programs from managers/supervisors as well as from trainers.

Setting Expectations for Temporary Trainees

One group of our experienced fluency coaching colleagues routinely trains temporary workers who are being considered for extended employment. In this situation, the trainers take advantage of the contingent nature of the trainees’ employment by stressing that “If you’re not keeping up in training, we won’t ask you to come back. In three weeks, there will be only X number of you left, so you need to show us commitment and hard work.”

This is serious business, and connecting fluency practice to job success as directly as possible can make a big difference.