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Exploring trainers' engaging instructional practices: a collective case study

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the phenomenon of training engagement from the trainers' perspective. Specifically, two questions guided this inquiry. First, how do trainers define engagement in the training context? and What strategies do trainers use to engage trainees?

Design/methodology/approach – The collective case study approach was adopted for this qualitative study. Seven cases were selected for in-depth analyses. Data were collected through individual, face-to-face interviews and analyzed using the constant comparative analysis method.

Findings – Major findings suggest that engaging training practices take various forms. They include being trainee-centered, maximizing learning through entertaining and interesting instruction, accommodating different learning styles, eliciting trainee participation by creating an encouraging learning environment and connecting with trainees by building rapport early in a training session.

Research limitations/implications – The small sample limits the generalizability of the findings. However, this study expands training literature by focusing on an under-explored research area, the role of engaging trainees in maximizing learning outcomes.

Practical implications – For trainers, this study offered some specific strategies they can use to engage learners in the training context to achieve desired learning outcomes. In addition, the seven cases selected for this study may be used as a benchmark against which both experienced and novice trainers compared their own practices.

Originality/value – This is one of very few qualitative studies with a focus on emotional aspects involved in training. The rich data from this study shed light on areas for future improvement, particularly regarding how to effectively engage trainees to maximize learning outcomes.

Keywords Emotions, Empathy, Case study, Qualitative research, Engaging training, Trainee engagement

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

To create a skillful workforce through training Nikandrou *et al.*, 2009), organizations have invested heavily in training programs (Grossman and Salas, 2011; Sung and Choi, 2009; Yamnill and McLean, 2001). According to Association for Talent Development, in 2013, the average per employee expenditure on training and development was $1,208, representing a 1 per cent increase compared to that in 2012; similarly, the number of learning hours used per employee also increased from 30.3 hours in 2012 to 31.5 hours in 2013. However, the extent to which training has yielded meaningful or desired outcomes – training effectiveness (e.g. improved human performance and enhanced

organizational competitiveness) or the degree to which newly learned knowledge and skills have been applied at work – training transfer (Holton *et al.*, 2000) remain highly questionable (Arthur *et al.*, 2003; Tannenbaum, 2002). In an attempt to address these two issues, researchers have identified a number of factors that could affect the outcomes and application of training, including trainee characteristics, training design, delivery methods, the skills or task characteristics trained, the choice of training evaluation criteria and support systems at work (Aguinis and Kraiger, 2009; Arthur *et al.*, 2003). Some of these factors are beyond the training room and out of trainers' and trainees' control (e.g. work environment); yet, others can be leveraged to enhance training effectiveness and facilitate learning transfer. This study focused on one of these controllable elements – engaging instructional practices as adopted by trainers, which we refer to as training engagement. Focusing on this aspect is meaningful, as research suggests that interactions between trainers and trainees impact trainees' conceptual understanding of the knowledge and skills delivered during training (Arthur *et al.*, 2003; Nikandrou *et al.*, 2009). Thus, how to interact with or engage trainees is worth consideration.

Trainers, in addition to demonstrating a sound understanding of the course content, should also present the content in an appealing and engaging manner (Yilmaz, 2011). To maximize the learning outcomes, trainers must consider trainee values (Gustafson and Branch, 2002) and incorporate trainees' perspective into their instruction (Baroffio *et al.*, 2006; Gasiewski *et al.*, 2012; Tigelaar *et al.*, 2004). One way to accomplish this goal is by engaging trainees through encouragement, support and empathy. On the other hand, trainers' beliefs in their own instruction, content and learners also impact their instructional effectiveness (Hativa and Birenbaum, 2000; Stanley, 2013). Thus, it is important that trainers design the training content and delivery methods strategically and carefully to facilitate learning and engage trainees. As Klem and Connell (2004, p. 270) noted, "Learners who perceive instructors as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment in which expectations are high, clear, and fair are more likely to report engagement". Furthermore, it is essential for trainers to be emotionally connected with learners and demonstrate empathy, care and association at a deeper level to earn learners' trust and confidence (Arghode, 2012; Arghode *et al.*, 2013). Making the learning environment safe and open is, therefore, a key to quality learning experiences (Arghode, 2013).

The role of trainers' knowledge, skills, abilities and other attributes (KSAOs) (Friedel and Rudd, 2009) and their impact on trainee engagement demand further attention in the training literature; similarly, the relationship between training engagement and learning outcomes also warrants further research. Nearly all previous studies on trainee engagement fail to acknowledge the impact of trainers' KSAOs on engagement. How instructional design is influenced by learner motivation, trainers' passion and understanding and diverse learner backgrounds is not adequately explored in the current literature. Similarly, the impact of large classes on instructional design has not received adequate research attention (Olson *et al.*, 2011). This study intends to fill some of these voids.

The problem
Our study focused on one under-explored area in training – the trainer, for the following three reasons:

(1) First, previous research revealed that trainers' attributes matter significantly to the improvement of trainees' understanding of the training content (Ghosh *et al.*, 2012).

(2) Second, a gap has been identified between instruction delivery and trainees' conceptual understanding and skill enhancement (Nunan, 1995).

(3) Third, training is also considered vital for improving cognitive and behavioral skills, productivity, efficiency and effectiveness (Grossman and Salas, 2011).

Moreover, the critical role of trainers in facilitating learning outcomes, while being acknowledged, has not received adequate research attention. Specifically, we found two gaps in the current research. One is that previous studies focused primarily on the trainees, including the trainees' intrinsic factors (Burke and Hutchins, 2007), such as motivation and inclination to learn, or extrinsic factors (Hofer, 2002), such as trainees' desire to receive accolades from instructors and peers. Another gap is that previous studies adopted exclusively quantitative research methods to examine trainers' traits (Ghosh *et al.*, 2012) or one aspect of engagement such as cognitive engagement (Appleton *et al.*, 2006). There are limited studies on trainee engagement in the formal education context (Handelsman *et al.*, 2005) and even fewer in the context of training and workplace learning (Noe *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, the current study contributed toward filling these two voids by focusing on trainers and their engaging practices in the training context using a qualitative research design.

Purpose and research questions
The purpose of the study was to explore instructional practices of trainers in engaging trainees. Specifically two questions guided this inquiry:

RQ1. How do the trainers in this study define trainee engagement?

RQ2. What strategies do the trainers in this study use to engage trainees during training?

Methods
The collective case study design was adopted to address the two research questions (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2005). We focused on trainers as cases for analysis to deeply understand their perceptions and engaging instructional practices. The collective case study design enables exploration and critical analysis rather than mere assessment of the phenomenon, hence appropriate for this study. It is also appropriate when the goal is to compare and study several similar cases (Yin, 2009). Further, the case design provides multiple perspectives, thereby broadening the study dimensions, adding depth and providing clarity to the phenomenon under investigation (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

Sampling procedures
For practical reasons, we bounded this study to one city in southern USA. We recruited the participants primarily from two sources:

(1) members of a reputed training association; and

(2) trainers from a local institution.

We decided to use the above places for participant recruitment because trainers working in diverse industries across the USA are affiliated with the training association; thus, it provides a good representation of industries and geographic regions in the USA Further, the trainers are from diverse backgrounds and are also known for their training prowess. The trainers are also renowned in their fields as only highly successful, experienced and well-respected trainers are given the training opportunity by the institute participating in this study To be included in this study, the trainer must:

- have a minimum of 15 years of training experience;
- is recognized as an engaging trainer based on the recommendations from our contact person from the institution; and
- is willing and available to participate in the study and can be easily accessed.

Regarding the first criterion, we used 15 years as the parameter, as we believe it allowed us to collect information-rich data (Patton, 2002). Regarding selecting trainers who are engaging, we relied solely on the recommendations of our contact person from the participating institution. As far as the sample size is concerned, we stopped recruiting participants upon reaching a point of saturation, meaning no new patterns emerged and broader outline and secondary sub-themes were discovered (Ambert *et al.*, 1995).

The sample consists of seven trainers working in different industries. For confidentiality, each trainer was assigned a pseudonym. Table I provides an overview of the trainers' backgrounds. More detailed descriptions of the seven participants will be provided in the Findings section.

Data collection
We used in-depth interviews (Swanson *et al.*, 2005; Wang and Roulston, 2007) as the primary data collection method. A semi-structured (Creswell, 2007) interview protocol comprising seven open-ended questions, was used to ensure consistency of findings from different participants (Patton, 2002). We conducted two rounds of interviews with each participant. The first interview lasted for about 60 minutes. However, based on the conversations with the individual participants, we asked probing questions. We

Participant no. and code	Participant pseudonym	Primary area of training	Current area of work	Training experience in years
D-C#1	Derek	Farm machinery	Health	35
B-G#2	Brenda	Finance, human resources	Human Resources	23
A-H#3	Amy	Human resources hotel	Hotel	17
J-C#4	Jennifer	Catering	Catering	20
M-H#5	Michael	Finance, hospitality	Hospitality	25
N-S#6	Nikole	Sales	Sales	18
N-I#7	Niel	Sales	Industrial distribution	37

Table I.
Profile of study participants

audio-taped all the interviews and transcribed the recordings verbatim within five to ten days of the data collection. We also conducted follow-up interviews with all the participants for further probing, clarification and in-depth exploration of the responses. The follow-up interviews also helped to build rapport with the participants, ultimately yielding rich data. The interviews generated a total of 210 pages of data.

Data analysis
We analyzed the data both during and after data collection (Swanson *et al.*, 2005) and used participants' views on engaging instructional strategies as the units of analysis. Following transcriptions, we read the transcribed verbatim (Oliver *et al.*, 2005) a few times to identify the common themes and used the constant comparative analysis method (Glaser, 1965) to delimit the categories. We categorized the participants' responses based on emerging themes from our readings. Themes that did not belong to any categories were deleted.

Excerpts from the responses were clustered together. Our data analysis involved two stages:

(1) within-case analysis at Stage One (analyzing each participant's responses to identify and interpret important themes); and

(2) cross-case analysis at Stage Two (comparing and contrasting all responses to identify commonality across them).

Additionally, we compared our findings with the available literature to provide theoretical basis and research support.

The findings
Our thematic analysis of within cases and across cases revealed a number of themes under two broad categories:

(1) the meaning of engagement; and

(2) the strategies for engagement.

To support the findings, we use direct quotes with codes we developed, for example, the code D-C#1.2.1.8 should be interpreted as D (Derek), C (Clinic), 1 (corresponds to the first participant), 2 (follow-up interview 1 – first interview), 1 (page number on which the code can be found), 8 (code number) (Table II).

The meaning of engagement
When asked about what engagement meant to them, the seven participants shared quite a similar understanding and frequently used words and expressions such as *connecting, establishing connections, building rapport, care, empathy* and *emotions*. To our study participants, engagement meant making connections with trainees by getting to know trainees on a personal level, showing care about them, evoking emotions during training, and having empathy for them.

Getting to know trainees on a personal level
This is the most prominent theme emphasized by all the trainers because they believe that building personal connections is the essential first step toward engaging trainees in the learning process. The following quotes are representative:

Category	Themes
1. Meaning of engagement	1.1 Get to know trainees
	1.2 Showing care
	1.3 Evoking emotions
	1.4 Having empathy
2. Strategies for engagement	2.1 Show passion and energy
	2.2 Demonstrate competency
	2.3 Utilize interpersonal skills
	2.4. Create a learning-conducive environment
	2.5 Employ active training methods
	2.6 Deliver interesting and entertaining sessions
	2.7 Focus on application
	2.8 Make training relevant

Table II.
Major findings from
the study

> When people [trainees] come to an event [training] they are just not nameless faceless persons to me. I want to know them better. I want to welcome them into my environment that I have set up for them and make sure that they have a positive experience (Brenda, B-G#2.2.5.27).

> I make it a point to introduce myself even before the workshop begins. Taking time shaking hands, having them introduce themselves to what they do and having some conversation about something (Amy, A-H#3.2.5.16).

To our participants, getting to know trainees also means understanding their backgrounds, values, beliefs, interests, passion and inclinations. With natural curiosity Niel tries to find out his trainees' interests at the beginning of the training session. If he finds something interesting, he would probe about it. Because of his personal approach, Niel's trainees feel comfortable to approach him and converse with him.

Derek makes an effort in arriving early at the training class, informally interacts with his trainees before the training starts to get to know them. In addition, he also shares his own background candidly. During the training session, Derek sets an informal tone to encourage the trainees to share their experiences relevant to the training content.

Showing care about trainees
In addition to getting to know their trainees, our study participants also emphasized the importance of showing genuine care about them. Brenda and Amy are two exemplary cases in this regard. Brenda shows her care about the trainees by being attentive to the logistics. For example, she inquires trainees to find out if their stay is comfortable, if they are satisfied with the food and other arrangements, if the temperature setting in the room is comfortable and recommends good local places to visit for recreational purposes. According to Brenda, if trainees are not comfortable with logistics, it may negatively impact their willingness to participate in the training program. Brenda elaborated:

> I try to make sure that the snacks that they [workshop organizers] provide and meals that are included are those most people will enjoy. I try to find out the vegetarians in the group or anybody else who has dietary restrictions, if there are overnight accommodations required. I also try to find nearby hotels that trainees can stay, give them [trainees] rates, and send them all the information (B-G#2.2.5.25).

In addition, Brenda stated, "I try to make trainees comfortable, almost like a mother type of thing. I think that is my style to make sure people are comfortable" (B-G#2.2.5.26).

Making trainees comfortable by showing caring and support helps Brenda establish connection with the trainees. Brenda also stressed that genuine connections develop strong relationships between the trainer and the trainees. Therefore, trainees are more receptive to the presented information which improves their involvement.

Amy strongly believes that her innate ability to care about trainees helps her establish connections with the trainees. Amy shared one instance where she noticed that her trainees were not engaged. To find out why, Amy approached a few trainees during the break and found out some of the trainees had a hard time understanding the content and her instruction because they were non-native English speakers. To address the language issue, Amy opted to use simpler expressions and reduced the instruction delivery pace. Amy used the above example to illustrate the importance of identifying trainees' needs and modifying the instruction accordingly.

Evoking emotions
According to our participants, emotions play a vital role in engaging the audience. He elaborated:

> I have essentially learned that humans make decisions based on our feelings. So we have to get below the technical data and get to how the trainees feel about everything in the situation that includes the instruction, how the trainees feel about the instructor, how the trainees feel about the subject matter, and how the trainees feel about the environment they are sitting in (D-C#1.2.2.12).

Derek also stressed if trainees identify themselves with the knowledge and the content, it enhances their learning. Hence, Derek strives to learn about trainees' passion and interests. Knowing what the trainees are passionate about enables Derek to incorporate relevant content in the instruction so that the trainees are motivated to pay more attention to the instruction.

Jennifer mentioned, "It is my moral responsibility to be good at what I do to support their [trainees'] professional growth". Jennifer not only considers the intellectual aspect of training (i.e. providing the right content, simplifying the concepts, and organizing the information) but also equally values the emotions involved in the training:

> I think the majority of trainers focus on the intellectual part of the program. What I focus is both physical means and emotional connection. I try to penetrate emotionally and not just intellectually. Trainers miss that [emotional connection] a lot. It [emotional involvement] is risky, and trainers have to kind of practice it and play. You have to have courage first of all to go there (A-H#3.2.6.27).

Although involving trainees emotionally is important and impacts trainee engagement, the participants also recognized that emotional engagement is not easy to achieve because it involves risks and requires a lot of preparation, sound planning and meticulous execution on the trainer's part.

Having empathy
Being empathetic is another way to engage the trainees, according to our participants. Jennifer stated that she is deeply empathetic to her trainees because she knows her trainees support their families through the jobs they have in food

services. To be able to empathize with trainees, Derek encouraged trainers to consider as many elements as possible such as trainees' background, culture, learning styles, knowledge levels and interests. Amy believes in "helping people learn and grow". It is important for her to use training to develop trainee knowledge and skills needed to perform their jobs well. In this sense, Amy disparages trainers who just want to "check a mark off" of their to-do list. Instead, she looks for ways to enhance the effectiveness of her training delivery with an end goal of "making a significant positive impact." Amy explained:

> To impact people's lives you need to establish a level of rapport and it can be superficial because people aren't going to tell me their entire life story but any effort you do for the audience is done with a proper intentions which is I want this information to be relevant to you, I want to help you understand it and I want to make it practical and useful to you (A-H#3.2.5.13).

Strategies for engagement
In this study, our participants identified a number of strategies that would help engage trainees in the learning process. Below, we report eight most frequently mentioned strategies.

Show passion and energy
Every participant supported that the trainer's energy and enthusiasm are important to trainees. Jennifer, Nikole, Niel and Derek all emphasized that the trainees are more energetic, involved and interested in training if trainers exude confidence and radiate enthusiasm. Trainers transmit their positivity to the trainees. Michael stressed that enthusiastic, active and exuberant trainers are successful in effectively engaging trainees. Similarly, the importance of showing passion, energy and enthusiasm was stressed by Amy, Niel and Jennifer. Although Nikole did not overtly mention being passionate in delivering training, she considered it essential to radiate energy and contagious charm for successful delivery.

Demonstrate competency
To our participants, a competent trainer is a subject matter expert (SME). Jennifer stressed that the right amount of energy should be complimented with subject knowledge and content presentation. Amy echoed Jennifer's point, "If the audience is not confident about the trainer's abilities and content knowledge, the training will not be engaging". Similarly, Nikole emphasized the balance between being an SME and entertainer at the same time. She argued that using only either skill limits trainee engagement. Derek emphasized that familiarity with the content helps the trainers to deliver the training emphatically.

Further, the participants acknowledged that trainers' competency also impacted the style and method of instruction. Michael noted, not all trainers are competent to teach every subject:

> If I am in a position of leadership that has totally different methodology, say for instance, a drill sergeant, I can do it but I won't enjoy it. I will not get the same joy. So that is not to say that the methodology is not effective; people do get joy out of it (M-H#5.2.3.5).

Therefore, Michael highlighted the importance of aligning trainers' competency with the type of training delivered. He also advocated the need to match the trainers' interests and personality with the type of training delivered.

Utilize interpersonal skills
Our participants believed that interpersonal skills played a vital role in training and giving trainers advantages. Having good interpersonal skills enables the trainers to build rapport with trainees, better understand trainees' perspective and facilitate the development of mutual trust and respect. It is not surprising that trainers such as Derek and Michael attached high importance to trainers' interpersonal skills. Evidently, interpersonal skills are considered by the participants as essential for delivering effective training.

Create a learning-conducive environment
All the participants stressed the importance of creating a learning environment that is "encouraging" (Michael), "safe" (Amy) and supportive (Niel). To do so, they used various strategies, among which, developing relationships with the trainees and understanding their needs, interests and background was the most common. It is the belief of the trainers that having such an environment enables the trainees to be more receptive to the training.

Use active training methods
Generally, successful training sessions involve a lot of interaction and participation. All seven participants stressed that facilitation is more important in training than merely presenting materials. To engage trainees in active learning, the seven participants used a variety of techniques. Examples offered by the participants include sharing personal backgrounds (all the seven trainers), seeking participants' feedback (Nikole, Brenda and Jennifer), asking questions (Niel and Nikole), telling stories (Derek), conducting discussion sessions (Niel) and using group activities (Brenda). The participants also paid attention to subtle nuances of conducting sessions and appropriately spacing training sessions to give trainees time to reflect and digest new information.

Deliver interesting and entertaining sessions
According to the participants, a successful training session should also be interesting and entertaining because making training interesting helps increase the level of learning engagement. To accomplish this goal, the trainers used humor but with care. For example, Michael recognized that humor is a double-edged sword. That is, when used properly, humor would make training entertaining and more effective; otherwise, it would likely distract the trainees from the content. Thus, our participants called for more focus on meeting meet the learning objectives rather than merely entertaining the trainees.

Focus on learning transfer
According to our participants, a successful training session brings about behavioral change, leads to improved knowledge and enhanced skills and hopefully changes trainees' attitudes. Therefore, they all placed high importance to the issue of learning transfer. To facilitate the transfer of learning, the trainers reported the use of three strategies:

(1) focusing on the application of the new knowledge and skills;

(2) making training relevant; and

(3) accommodating trainee's needs, Nikole argued that unless trainees apply the skills gained through the training program, training cannot be perceived successful.

To make training relevant, our study participants made an effort in relating to the trainees' experience. For example, both Niel and Brenda believed that providing right and pertinent examples is a key to successfully engage trainees and ensure learning transfer. Brenda stated, "I work on the material diligently to see that the content suit the group [trainees] by researching the needs of the group [trainees]". Amy stressed the importance of acknowledging individual differences and attuning training practices accordingly to match trainees' learning styles, capabilities, and culture. Trainers should deliver training by being mindful of trainees' backgrounds.

Discussion

Training has a holistic aim of developing employees and assisting them in fulfilling the organizational needs besides enhancing employees' potential to create career development opportunities (Pont, 2003). Chen *et al.* (2007, p. 846) added that training programs should focus on achieving "organizational strategic goals". It is important to tailor training programs to meet organization's goals, as ineffective training programs deteriorate organizational performance (Chen and Klimoski, 2007). Organizations now consider training as an integral part of the organization's progress (Salas and Cannon-Bowers, 2001; Swanson, 2001; Swanson and Sleezer, 1987). Besides aligning training objectives with organizational goals, to warrant success in training, it is also important to ensure transfer of training, which is discussed in the following segment.

Because training is dynamic in nature, the content and methods should be updated constantly. Trainers walk a tightrope in balancing different elements of a training program for effectively designing and delivering training. Although trainers have little control over training structure, as it is bounded by needs' assessment results and training objectives, trainers can still design training to effectively deliver the content (Arthur *et al.*, 2003).

Numerous researchers correlate application of knowledge and skills gained through training with training effectiveness (Baldwin and Ford, 1988; Ford and Weissbein, 1997; Holton, 1996; Holton *et al.* 2000; Noe and Schmitt, 1986; Yamnill and McLean, 2001). Unless trainees learn and gain knowledge, develop skills and transform their attitudes by attending the training, the purpose of training is not attained. Trainees can transfer their learning, from training, to their job only if they learn the concepts effectively during training. Nevertheless, to learn the concepts, the trainees must be engaged through active training.

Findings from this study revealed the pivotal role that a trainer can play in promoting training engagement. Our findings also suggest that whether trainers are able to engage trainees or not is determined by multiple factors, some of which are skills that can be learned and developed, and some are associated with the innate traits of the trainer. Based on the findings above, we paint a picture of an engaging trainer as below. This picture can also serve as a guide for trainers who desire to enhance learning engagement and achieve effective outcomes.

First, engaging trainers are very learner-centered. Not only do they make an effort in connecting with their trainees, they also strive to understand their trainees' background, perspectives and values. Even when knowing the audience is impossible in advance, the trainers in our study take time during the training session to get to know their audience. It is this care and knowledge about their trainees that have enabled them to recognize individual differences, preferences and struggles during the learning process, and thus make appropriate adjustments during training to address these emerging issues. The positive impact of such ability on the learning engagement and effectiveness is also recognized by previous research (Fowler, 2006; Ranson *et al.*, 1996; Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992). In addition, being learner-centered also means that the trainers are committed to creating a supportive learning environment where individuals feel comfortable sharing their opinions and experiences. Such an environment allows trainees to participate in training activities in a safe and encouraging manner (Pont, 2003).

Second, engaging trainers use diverse interactive training techniques. As indicated by the interviewed trainers, the appropriate design and development of training programs alone are insufficient in ensuring an effective training program; excellent planning and structure should be matched equally well with engaging instructional skills. This is particularly important as most of the trainers have very little control over trainees' motivation. A wide range of instructional methods were shared by our participants and are worth considering. Examples are actively communicating with the audience, using humor during instruction, facilitating rather than lecturing and telling stories. These techniques have proved to be effective in making training more interesting and learners more engaged. Therefore, trainers should make an effort in identifying delivery strategies that will likely encourage participants to be more active in the learning process. Third, engaging trainers are content experts. Based on the participants' experiences as trainers, lack of solid knowledge of the subject matter delivered would make them quickly lose credibility and trainees' trust. In fact, our participants identified lack of content expertise as the biggest deterrent in keeping trainees' engaged. Being knowledgeable about the training would likely enable trainers to better articulate the benefits to the trainees (Kalargyrou and Woods, 2011). If trainees are convinced that the material presented in the training will add to their KSAOs, trainees are more likely to participate and become engaged in the training activities. Therefore, trainers should commit themselves to continuing professional development so that they can stay current on the subject matter and technologies that may facilitate effective delivery of the training materials.

Fourth, engaging trainers know how to make training relevant and applicable. As our participants shared, their ultimate goal is to facilitate the learning transfer. To do so, they tried to make training relevant so that the trainees can relate the new knowledge and skills to their own experience and work situations. Ample literature is available to help us understand the unique learning needs of adults; one of which is the need to see practical application of new learning. Thus, effective trainers facilitate the transfer of knowledge by linking it to the trainees' reality.

Lastly, engaging trainers are energetic, enthusiastic, passionate and empathetic. In numerous occasions during the interviews, our study participants emphasized the importance of exhibiting energy and passion about training. In addition, having empathy with the trainees is likely to encourage trainers to go an extra mile to create learning moments for their audience (Montesino, 2002; Olsen, 1998; Rossett, 1997). While the positive

effect of these personal attributes of trainers is recognized in the literature (Kalargyrou and Woods, 2011), few studies have been devoted to this topic. In this sense, our study is timely and valuable, in that it has provided some compelling qualitative evidence that reinforces the positive effect of these trainer attributes on learning engagement.

To sum up, to promote active learning participation, trainers should not only pay close attention to their trainees, seek interactive instructional methods (Arghode, 2013) and have a good command of the subject matter but also exhibit confidence, radiate energy and enthusiasm and passion about training. In addition, our participants also shed light on what makes training best. Among different characteristics identified, engagement, transfer and entertainment were the three most frequently mentioned elements.

Study implications
Findings from this study have valuable implications for training practice and research. We discuss each below.

Practical implications
Training and development takes a center stage in employee development in an organization. The primary objective of training is to bridge the gap between employees' current KSAOs and the desired KSAOs. However, to be effective, training should be well planned and executed. Unlike previous research that focuses largely on training designs, this study highlighted the important role of trainers in impacting the training outcomes. This has significant implications for current trainers and those who aspire to become one. It is important that training professionals engage themselves in continuing professional development so that they not only keep themselves updated on the new knowledge and skills they may deliver, but, more importantly, become more reflective in their own training practice.

In addition, trainers should take a more active role in the training process, that is, as a learning facilitator, not merely as a knowledge transmitter. Effective facilitation is an important skill in a trainer's arsenal (Goad, 1982). To be a good facilitator, trainers should involve trainees and conduct activities that foster the connections and interactions between trainers and trainees (Beebe, 2007). By doing so, trainers are in a better position in linking the organizational needs with training design. It is simply not enough to focus on analyzing the need, identifying the areas for development, designing the training programs and developing the content. A successful training program should be delivered effectively. The foremost requirement is to have an understanding about trainees' backgrounds. After learning about the backgrounds, trainers should attune their programs to accommodate different learning styles and needs of individual trainees to the extent possible. Trainers should involve trainees to keep them engaged through the use of humor, interesting and entertaining lectures and seeking trainee participation. Forming connections with trainees and respecting trainees' views also creates an environment that supports learning.

Research implications
Like any other studies, this study has limitations. Each one of them presents an opportunity for future research. First, while it was the intent to take a close look at selected cases, the small number will not allow the findings to be generalized to larger populations. More research is needed to include a larger number of training

professionals across industries and cultures. Second, this study focused on an area which has not been given adequate research attention in training literature, which is, using a qualitative approach in exploring engaging training. Previous studies have been dominated by quantitative methods; more qualitative studies are needed to build an in-depth understanding of training engagement.

Third, related to the above point, this study illustrated one approach (collective case study) to examine the topic of training engagement. We encourage scholars who are interested in this research topic to explore different qualitative research methods. For example, a phenomenological study would allow the research to take a much closer look at the lived experience of trainers and may thus generate different readings.

Finally, because many factors affect trainees' learning outcomes, we encourage researchers to extend beyond the current study to understand and delve deeper into trainee engagement. For example, a study on how the trainee background may affect instruction is worth conducting. Comparison between different types of trainee engagement (e.g. through case study, role play, simulation, experiential learning activities and facilitation) can be useful to identify active training instructional practices.

Conclusions

Training is not merely a process where the information exchange takes place between trainers and trainees. Rather, it is a symbiotic interaction through which trainers and trainees grow together, learn from one another and contribute to the relationship through their knowledge, skills, abilities and experiences. The findings of this study provide a variety of strategies that can be used to enhance trainee engagement.

However, caution is needed when considering the adoption of any one or combination of these strategies because there is no cookie-cutter approach that will work every time in every situation. Similarly, an instructional strategy, which is a roaring success when applied to one situation, may fail unexpectedly in another. Likewise, a trainer who is extremely successful in delivering instruction in a particular way may find it difficult to deliver the instruction in another way. There is a plethora of factors and complex interactions among them for a trainer to consider. For example, trainers lacking complete autonomy regarding training design and implementation have to implement an organizationally acceptable way of conducting training even if they do not agree with the policies. In addition, if they are internal trainers, they may have to deal with organizational politics and culture; otherwise, they risk stepping on someone's toes. Ultimately, a trainer is in the best position to select the most suitable instructional method appropriate to a particular context and a particular group of trainees (Kalargyrou and Woods, 2011). Without a thorough understanding of the contextual variables, trainers are unlikely to achieve the optimal learning outcomes no matter how engaging they are.

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