Effective Learning Systems Models – Part IV
By Harold D. Stolovitch and Erica J. Keeps

In this series of articles, we address whole learning systems, some of which are rarely used although they have demonstrated effectiveness. We're not certain why some beneficial systems aren't used more frequently, but our experience tells us that many people in the learning and performance world either don't know about them, don't know how to develop and implement them, or simply are fearful of rocking the boat.

We continue to address these learning systems (natural experience, experimental learning, structured on-the-job training [SOJT], learner-controlled instruction [LCI] and individual developmental plans) which have stood the test of time and have demonstrated effectiveness in this edition of the *HSA e-Xpress*. For each of these learning systems models, we have created an information chart that can familiarize you with them and help you try them out. In the January 2011 edition of the *HSA e-Xpress*, we presented structured on-the-job training learning (click here to read it), in October 2010, we presented experiential learning (click here to read it), and in July 2010, we presented natural experience (click here to read it). In this edition, we offer learner-controlled instruction.

Learner-Controlled Instruction

What is it?

- Learner-controlled instruction (LCI) is a learning system and a strategy that shifts power from instructor to learner. In contrast to traditional training systems where the instructor establishes the content, controls the sequences, selects the media and presentation mechanisms, and assumes responsibility for evaluating learning achievement, in LCI the power and control over these factors and the responsibility for learning are delegated to the learner.

- This is a system in which the individual learner/trainee selects from a variety of resources to acquire skills/knowledge and to demonstrate competence.

- Although learners control the pacing, sequencing, and choice of learning resources, delegation of instructional control is constrained by three factors:

    1. the variety of content and informational sources made available

    2. a designer, with expert input, who states the objectives that the learner must achieve

    3. tools for measuring knowledge/skill acquisition that are created by people experienced in the content areas with the assistance of learning, performance or evaluation professionals.

With whom can it be used?

- LCI is best applied to professional, supervisory, and management positions (for example, retail store managers, sales and insurance representatives, general managers).

- It works best with autonomous learners who have some measure of control over decision making in their jobs (it's not good for training infantry foot soldiers or performers of repetitive tasks).

- It is particularly useful for geographically dispersed populations.

- LCI has advantages with heterogeneous populations--people who come into a job position with very diverse mastery levels.

- One of the major virtues of LCI is that it accommodates trainees entering at any time--no groups or classes are required (although classes on a particular relevant topic can be included as resources for learning).

- It is often used with learners who will be assigned to a location other than where they are learning the job.

For what type of content can it be used?

- LCI is best used for higher-level skills, particularly those in which decision making plays a major role.

- It is very appropriate for management and professional practice content.

What are the components?

- LCI requires a set of overall objectives.

- A set of detailed specific performance objectives for which the learner must demonstrate mastery at the end of training is also needed. Often there is a "review board" that verifies this mastery.

- For each specific objective, LCI provides one or more learning experiences consisting of

    o the objective

    o a description of the activity

    o a measurement device for assessing proficiency (both by the learner and by a qualified third party)

    o a standard of acceptable performance

    o a description of learning resources

    o a time plan for accomplishing the learning.

- An administrative manual for the trainee is needed to explain how the system works.

- A "box" of resources (for example, training booklets, procedural write-ups, articles, videos, audiotapes, online courses, Websites to visit, a case database) should be provided.

- A real-world environment (for example, a training electronics dealership) in which the learner completes the learning activities and demonstrates competencies should be provided. In many cases, certain locations are identified as exemplary or training locations. The manager and key staff in those locations are trained to facilitate LCI and to act as mentors or guides.

- A management system is for tracking and monitoring learner progress and environmental constraints.

- There should be a system for providing assistance and reinforcement contact to trainees.

- An evaluation system is required for certifying that the learner has mastered all the tasks and can either assume the assigned role or receive further seasoning prior to final assignment.

How does LCI work?

- Trainees go through a preassessment to determine their learning needs.

- Based on individual learning needs, the trainee selects specific learning objectives to complete and schedules their completion.

- The trainee consults with a training administrator to verify and adjust the training plan. In some cases there is a local mentor who assists.

- The learner completes each appropriate learning experience related to the objective, accessing appropriate resources, demonstrating and assessing his or her skill, and accessing additional resources for remediation as required.

- Skill competencies are determined through self-assessment, environmental feedback ,and/or expert verification, often via a local mentor. Learners collect evidence of results.

- Periodically the training administrator meets with the learner to monitor progress and deal with environmental constraints or identify additional learning resources.

- The learner, usually with the help of a mentor, determines when she or he is ready to be a "candidate for graduation" based on her or his assessment of learning progress and the assessment of the mentor. The training administrator consults with the learner and others on readiness.

- A team of appropriate people capable of assessing the learner's competency is assembled and drills the candidate, using prepared guidelines. The

purpose of this drill is to determine whether the learner is ready to move to an operational position.

- Successful candidates graduate and become available for the job for which they have trained.

- Unsuccessful candidates or those requiring more seasoning are required to engage in further learning activities until ready for re-examination.

What are the advantages?

- The LCI system is extremely efficient because the focus is on results rather than learning activities. Learners can progress very rapidly (for example, one company reduced learning time from 52 weeks of OJT to on average 6 weeks of LCI).

- There is no waiting for classes because the learner operates independently and can begin training at any time.

- Learning can be conducted anywhere there is access to a real-world environment. Learning activities can include taking field trips, analyzing competitive practices, reading, practicing, attending courses, or even performing operational tasks.

- Training focuses only on what is needed for each individual.

- Training is very close to the job itself.

- The system does not drain personnel resources because these are tapped only as needed.

- The trainee learns to select his or her own resources, manage time, evaluate personal results through concrete evidence, and determine readiness to terminate training (often with consultation)--all of which leads to developing an autonomous self-starter. The process of LCI, in addition to the content, helps build independent managers and professionals.

- The training environment benefits from what the trainee learns about it and what she or he can contribute to improve it.

What are the disadvantages?

- A well-functioning LCI program requires people skilled at designing such a system, and lengthy design time.

- It requires a broad variety of resources.

- It demands careful and systematic testing and validation of the system.

- There must be total buy-in by all levels of management. Independent learners, even when placed in a planned environment, can cause some fear among those not used to "learner control."

- LCI often results in nonautonomous candidates washing out early (which may also be an advantage).

What resources are required?

- *Personnel:*
    o competent LCI designer
    o training administrators who track learner progress
    o people within the training environment to act as resources and evaluators
    o additional people to constitute evaluation teams
- *Time:*
    o lengthy job analysis and considerable design time
    o adequate lead time to validate the system
    o learner time, during which learners are removed from their own immediate work environments and job responsibilities to pursue training (an average LCI program runs 6 to 12 weeks, but usually is shorter than traditional learning systems)
- *Costs:*
    o heavy analysis, design, and validation costs
    o minimal production and delivery costs
    o costs for resources and materials
    o personnel salaries and lost opportunity costs

What are some examples?

- Supermarket manager program
- Mega-bookstore manager program
- Buyer training program for a fashion store chain
- Patent analyst program for a government agency
- Project manager development program to transform high-tech specialists into project managers.

Be sure to catch the fifth and final learning systems model – individual development plan – in the July 2011 edition of the *HSA e-Xpress*.

This article is an excerpt from Harold Stolovitch and Erica Keeps' bestseller, *Beyond Training Ain't Performance Fieldbook*. Interested in learning more? Click here to order a copy of the book.