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Sorry, There's No App For That



By: Donald J. Chupp

President, Fireside Partners Inc.

Experiential Learning and Achieving Cerebral Retention

Since when did we become an industry of passive learners, perfectly content to sit quietly through another lectern-leaning, talking head presenter? Even if he or she gets out from behind the safety of that wooden divide, the chances you will retain any principle part of the message the next day are quite slim.

But wait! We have electronic tools like PowerPoint to save us! We can't have a presentation without slides, can we? Thank goodness the talking head will have something else to lean on. I'm sorry, Mr. Session Coordinator, did you say you want me to send you the slide deck in advance to see what I will be talking about during my presentation? What? Wow.

What would Aristotle say about PowerPoint and Prezi? This is the guy who said—more or less—that anything we need to learn before we do it, we can only learn by doing it. Uh, like flying an airplane?

More recently, yet still more than a hundred years ago, a guy named Hermann Ebbinghaus conceptualized the now famous learning curve. This examined the correlation between memory and time. In summary, it says: If you attend a month-long lecture, your mental retention rate starts at 100 percent on day one (that's generous); however, there is a 50–80 percent loss of learning from the second day onward, ultimately leading to a retention rate of just 2–3 percent at the end of 30 days.

Bring Ebbinghaus into the digital age where we communicate in 140 characters or less—commensurate with attention spans, by the way. If we seek retention today, we have to hit it hard and fast and the audience will have to "feel it"; the kind of feel it where you walk out of the room knowing something is going to change—because you have changed. That might just be the very definition of learning.

Why do we see a continual divide between learning and doing, and why do we keep them



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separate in our aviation safety and emergency response programs? Enter the practice of experiential learning, commonly referred to as ELT for Experiential Learning Theory (self-titled by this author as *ExLearn* to indicate its divergent approach to learning). This teaching methodology¹ is rapidly becoming the standard in academia and in technical training applications.

ExLearn is much more than simply learning by doing. As higher education continues to evolve, experiential learning is used more and more in facets of the working world that require at least some level of performance proficiency. For example, Clark & White point out that “a quality university business education program must include an experiential learning component”.²

Many of us in the aviation community contend with the challenges of mentoring the millennial generation, especially in the area of building professionalism. This study makes a compelling case that professionalism—and professional maturity, if you will—, cannot be taught by passive observation; they must be learned behaviorally: by doing and assessing introspectively. How often do we facilitate a learning environment that embraces this approach—or are we still just telling young folks what to do?

Emergency Response Planning (ERP) also benefits from *ExLearn*. Short of actually experiencing an accident (no, thank you), how can corporate ERP developers know if their plan will actually work? The key is to bridge the gap between theory and action. That bridge exists thanks to *ExLearn*. Stephen Clark, Director of Marketing at Immaculate Flight, a leader in the aircraft cleaning industry, has participated in multiple ERP *ExLearn* events and notes the theory's unique value: “Nothing replaces the value of experience, some things you still have to feel to understand, for something like an ERP event [...] you just have to be there to get it.”

Innovative organizations like the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) are forging a path toward *ExLearn*, having now sponsored a Live Action Emergency Response Simulation at the 2015 Schedulers and Dispatchers Conference in San Jose, California, and the recent Emergency Response Simulation at the 2015 Business Aviation Convention and Exhibition³. Both events received very high satisfaction marks and have raised the bar for future learning sessions. Could it be that the talking heads are history? Maybe not just yet, but we can learn from this rising trend.

At the working flight-operations level, we can—and arguably should—take heed of what can be gained from *ExLearn*. In preparation for ERP drills and team-level training, strongly consider the addition of at least some level of an experiential component. Experience the incoming deluge of phone calls, practice face to face with an instructional⁴ family member role player, and answer the tough questions from a simulated FAA or NTSB investigator.



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One thing is certain: By incorporating some ExLearn components, you will never see your ERP the same way again; you will see it through the eyes of experience, and you will start to move it from a concept document to an action document. Your safety program will thank you!

"To assume a position of leadership is to assume the inherent responsibility to prepare, to practice, and to act."

– the author

1. Consider doing some research on Experiential Learning Theory when you get time. The benefits to both student and instructor are far reaching.
2. Clark, J., & White, G. "Experiential Learning: A Definitive Edge In The Job Market." *American Journal Of Business Education* 3.2 (2010): 115–118. Print.
3. <https://www.nbaa.org/events/bace/2015/news/20151118-nbaa2015-emergency-response-simulation-provides-somber-lessons.php>
4. Note that actors or basic role players can often over-act their role and cause more frustration than education. Select a trusted aviation emergency services provider to fill this role.



Fireside Partners Inc.

Fireside Partners, Inc., is a fully integrated emergency services provider designed to provide all services and resources required to respond effectively and compassionately in a crisis situation. Dedicated to building world-class emergency response programs (ERP), Fireside instills confidence, resiliency and readiness for high-net worth and high-visibility individuals and businesses. Fireside provides a broad array of services focused on prevention and on-site support to help customers protect their most important assets: their people and their good name.

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