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Adult Learning: How Do We Learn?

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A few weeks ago, I received an invitation for a program called “Comings and Goings: The Lived Experiences of Survivors of Domestic Violence.” Presented by the Chicago Bar Association’s Alliance for Women, the program was advertised as an “interactive training designed to demonstrate the experiences of domestic violence survivors and the choices they face.” Intrigued, I signed up for the program. As the Education Associate for the Commission on Professionalism, I am always eager for more interactive programming and looked forward to seeing one in action.

On October 30, I headed over to Seyfarth Shaw to participate in the training. From the beginning, it was shrouded in mystery. I was handed an envelope that I could not open until I was told to. I was instructed to sit at a table and await instructions. I did exactly that.

After a few introductory remarks, the facilitators, Professor Zelda Harris of Loyola and Alicia Aiken of the Confidentiality Institute, ushered us over to a series of poster boards lined up around half of the conference room. On each board was a location — home, hotel, apartment, friend’s house, shelter and homelessness. On a table beside each board was a jar. We were told not to speak during the exercise and follow the facilitators’ directions precisely. We were then told the following:

You are a 35-year-old woman who has been married for 15 years. You have three children, Gabriella, age 5, Maya, age 8 and Luis, age 14. You work part-time as a hairdresser while your kids are at school. You are devoutly religious. You have a modest home in Chicago. Your husband works in construction. You love your 3-year-old dog. It is the beginning of January.

The most important part of a continuing education program is an engaged audience.

For the next 30 minutes and in complete silence, each of us became that 35-year old woman. We all started at “home” and each had to decide how we would respond to different scenarios described by the facilitators. First, our husband yells at us. Do we leave home? We all stayed. Then our husband throws out our birth control pills. Do we leave home? We all stayed. Then our husband pushes and pinches us. Do we leave home? Some of us left, most stayed. I was one who left. I went to my friend’s apartment. This was where the envelope came into play.

In each of our envelopes were several yellow and green cards. Each time we moved to a new location, or a bell rang, we had to deposit cards. The green cards were money; the yellow cards

were goodwill. We had only so many of both. Staying at home was free. A friend's house was two yellow cards (but they didn't want your beloved dog). The shelter was one yellow card (but only kept you for 30 days and also didn't want your dog). The apartment took everyone, but cost far too much money. What decision do you make that's best for you, your children and your financial situation?

WHEN DO YOU LEAVE?

It was fascinating to see how long some of us stayed with our husband. He broke the cell phone, they stayed. He cut the credit cards, they stayed. He stalked our workplace, they stayed. Perhaps they were smart because many of us ran out of cards early on in the exercise and were forced to return home to an even worse situation. Moreover the problems that we thought we could solve by leaving home, stayed with us, even when we had enough money to survive. We had to pay for a lawyer to get a divorce. We got fired from our job because we had to take time out for court hearings. Child protective services investigated us because our children weren't attending school. Then, when we returned home, they took our children away because we were living in an abusive household. No one wanted to take our dog, and every once in a while, a voice in a foreign language would tell us something that we didn't understand. (It was in Mandarin and she was telling us where free green cards were available. How would we know? We didn't speak the language).

What happened in the end? Some of us got a divorce but our husband still got shared custody. Others of us returned home as we had nowhere else to go and we would lose our children otherwise. Some of us even returned home early on and suffered the abuse because our religious leader told us repeatedly that a woman's place was with her husband. At the end of 30 minutes, every one of us was emotionally drained. And it was only a simulation exercise.

THE ADULT LEARNER

I often get asked what the most important part of a successful continuing education program is — the speaker, the materials, the topic. I always say the same thing, "The most important part of a continuing education program is an engaged audience." You can have the most mind-blowing program on cutting-edge legal issues, and yet, if your audience is sitting tapping away on their smartphones, you will have reached precisely no one. Who wants to teach no one?

It is immensely difficult to teach adults. Not only is the adult brain different, adults are juggling numerous priorities and only have time to learn things that are immediately useful to them. If they want to know how to get from 1 to 2, and you're busy talking about 1.0003, they will not listen. And like children, adults like to be entertained. They live in an entertainment on-demand world, where, literally, anything they want is at their fingertips. That's what you as a facilitator are competing with and, fairly or not, that's the standard to which you are being held for adult learning.

Unfortunately, many facilitators choose to limit themselves to the lecture/PowerPoint method of teaching. But according to the Cone of Learning/Experience, we remember 10 percent of what we read, 20 percent of what we hear, 30 percent of what we see, 50 percent of what we see and hear, 70 percent of what we say and write, and 90 percent of what we do. At the top, narrow point of that cone, reading text and listening to a lecture — your PowerPoint learners will retain 10-20 percent of the information you have spent so long preparing. But at the bottom, wide base of the cone? Participating in a hands-on workshop, role-playing a situation, simulating a real experience, or going through the real experience. Those learners retain 70-90 percent of your teaching. That means, short of working on a transaction or a case, a simulation is going to be your best bet to

have your audience be engaged and retain what they have learned from the program.

Which is why Alicia and Zelda's program worked. Not only was the simulation successful, but after we finished, we discussed how we felt during the simulation and how that affected the domestic violence victims we see. Then we broke into small groups where we each tackled a different question. My group had to give advice to a new attorney working in the field. We then had another large discussion, and wrapped up with some learning points about domestic violence victims. The simulation, the facilitators and the discussion all provided an engaging, interesting, interactive learning experience that "stuck" in everyone's minds.

So let's put that as my professional wish for this year. As Education Associate for the Commission on Professionalism, I wish for an exponential increase in the number of hypothetical scenarios, small group discussions, role-plays, workshops and simulations. Because continuing legal education doesn't begin and end with a lecturer and a PowerPoint presentation. It begins with an audience coming in to learn, and it ends with them enjoying, retaining and applying what you have taught them that day. That's the key to a successful continuing education program.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Silverthorn is the Diversity and Education Director for the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism. Through the Commission's online platform, *2Civility*, Silverthorn works on blog posts, social networking sites, and online discussion groups focusing on legal education, diversity and young lawyers. She also works with law schools, law students and other legal groups, developing education courses and workshops.

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