



## WHAT

# Selecting the “Best” Content

*“The brain does not take meaning; it must make meaning. Project-based learning is experiential, cuts across many skills areas and integrates many disciplines, and of necessity starts with the big picture.”*

–Pat Wolfe (2006)

Now that you have created a thorough description of the big picture – the first five steps – of your design, you can select the content that best fits the people, situation, place, time and desired outcomes for your learning event.

As many of you know, finding or emphasizing the right aspects of content can be difficult and time consuming even for the most experienced teachers. Yet when we are creating a design that ensures adults have the time, resources and relevant challenges to discover and make meaning of the content, our choices must be even more selective. Sometimes, rather than taking the time necessary to be explicit about the most relevant content, teachers try to “cover” everything, which

always results in passive and unengaged learners who are forced to listen too much to the teacher! It's also very typical in this scenario to run out of time, go over time, or rush too fast to try to cover all the material. Little actual learning takes place. Narrowing the content, and choosing the “best” content, is key.

Before you begin this section, consider for a moment why you teach. For many people, at least part of why they teach is to have an impact, to encourage learners to change in some way, shape or form. In the SO THAT step you decided what change you were aiming for when learners are “back at work or home;” you determined what the learners would be doing differently after they left the learning event. You took this even further by asking how this change would make a difference in the long run or, alternatively, how this change would impact the organization or business to help achieve its mission. In this chapter you will see how choosing your content is a critical step in the process: without the “right” content you undermine your chances to have the kind of impact you desire.

In this chapter – the WHAT – you will identify, narrow and refine your content in four stages, based upon what you already know and what you learned in your LNRA. In these four stages you will:

- ONE** Name the needed skills, knowledge and attitudes for this particular learning event;
- TWO** Move from broad and general content to specific and immediate content;
- THREE** Check your work: focus again on the time and location; and
- FOUR** Check your work: focus again on the WHO and the WHY.

I suggest you read completely through the whole chapter before you begin your work. Then, if you feel clear about the process, follow the directions in “Your Task” and move through each of the four stages. If you have little or no experience in designing learning events, you may want to work with just one small chunk of content to start with, and then come back and complete the four stages with the rest of your content.

## 1. Name the Needed Skills, Knowledge and Attitudes

Identifying the most needed content – skills, knowledge and attitudes (SKA) – for transfer and, ideally, for impact, means that you are planning

and teaching with the learning outcomes in mind. It also means that you know and respect what your learners already know.

The following example is a small portion of a customer service workshop, which shows how the content links to transfer and impact. The content, divided into skills, knowledge and attitudes for this portion of the customer service workshop, includes:

- Win-win negotiating steps (knowledge);
- Active listening (skill); and
- Detached awareness (attitude).

NOTE: Later, as each content piece (WHAT) is combined with an active verb, you will be creating Achievement-Based Objectives (ABO). (If you'd like to skip ahead, you can learn about ABOs in the next chapter). The ABO represents what the learner will do with the content during the learning event.

Learning: What the learners will have done during the learning event (Achievement-Based Objectives)	Transfer: Back at work or home the learners now ...	Impact: The differences you ultimately see are ...
<p>Dissected and modified three customer service conversations using win-win negotiating steps (knowledge)</p> <p>Practiced active listening (skill)</p> <p>Experienced detached awareness (attitude)</p>	<p>Staff members respond even more professionally and more frequently to all customers, even under stressful conditions.</p>	<p>The word has spread that while staff will not be manipulated or pushed around, they will listen carefully and will eagerly work to be helpful and respectful. Customers are friendlier, have many fewer complaints, and satisfaction surveys have risen for three dimensions of service.</p>

Skills, knowledge and attitudes are integral to content, although it isn't always easy to "tease out" exactly what each is for the content you've chosen. This can be true even if you know your content inside and out (it's easy to forget the small building blocks) and it is also true if you have little intimate knowledge of your subject. As you are teasing out the skills, knowledge and attitudes, you want to have in mind what you understand from your LNRA that your learners already know so that you can connect respectfully to them, demonstrating that you honor and appreciate what they bring to the learning event.

To tease out the SKAs, let's look more closely at one piece of content from above: "active listening." One integral skill for indicating active listening is paraphrasing. One piece of knowledge might be the five visible key indicators of active listening. And an attitude might include valuing the benefits of active listening.

Perhaps in the above example, through your LNRA work, you learned that active listening was taught in two other workshops so you assume the participants know how to listen, yet in your observation you saw little active listening. In this case, how might the SKAs be different?

Coming back to your own 8 Steps of Design worksheet, what did you learn in your LNRA that can help you make content (SKA) decisions? The following questions and examples will guide you through your choices about content.

1. What skills does the learner need in order to use the content?  
For example, the ability to measure accurately is a fundamental and necessary skill to successfully administer medication or to use/follow a recipe for nutritionally balanced main dishes.
2. What skills are dimensions of the content?  
For example, motivational interviewing requires and includes active listening and proficiency with open-ended questions.
3. What is the contextual and historical basis of this content?  
What do learners come knowing or believing, and what do they need in order to critically reflect upon the validity of what is being taught and what is known? For example: In an orientation for new board members of a homeless shelter, the external and internal elements that influence homelessness, legislation and public policies over time will be an important framework for board members to be able to appreciate or assess current programming and statistics.
4. What attitudes will be barriers and which attitudes will add enthusiasm for your topic? How will you attend to each?  
For example, if you're working with a group that belongs to the same organization, you might address attitudes by eliciting

a list of historical changes over time, the political influences on the organization during each change, and asking what might change again in the next five or more years. In this way you invite critical reflection and acknowledge the inevitability of change, which influences people's attitudes. This subtle approach to attitudes honors adults as decision-makers, and reflects the adage often used by Dialogue Education practitioners: "Attitudes are caught, not taught."

Regardless of what attitude is aimed for, there are underlying assumptions and values associated with it. What are these for your content?

You may want to stop and make a note or two to yourself before moving to the next section.

## 2. Move From Broad and General to Specific and Immediate

The most obvious way to select and narrow the content is to move from the general to the specific. Look for content that reflects what the learner really, really needs in order to gain proficiency and achieve the change you want them to transfer back to work or home. Incrementally, you will move from the general to the specific as you determine which pieces will be most useful and valuable for this group at this point in time.

These more specific content choices are grounded in what you know about the topic, and what you know about the WHY and the WHO. As you read from top to bottom in the two examples below, what do notice about how the more general topic morphs into the more specific final topic?

### EXAMPLES

General	Beginning Topic # 1 Natural foods	Beginning Topic #2 Exercise
Slightly less general	Vegetables	Cardiovascular exercise
Even less general	Green vegetables	Five cardiovascular exercises

Specific	Easy to buy fresh green vegetables	Five 5-minute cardiovascular exercises
More specific	Locally grown fresh green vegetables	Five fun 5-minute cardiovascular exercises
Even more specific	Final Topic # 1 Locally grown fresh green vegetables available at your neighborhood farmer's market	Final Topic # 2 Five 5-minute fun things you LOVE to do that build cardiovascular endurance too!

Here are a few things the designer found out during the LNRA about Topic #1, above:

- The group was eating plenty of fruit, but only a couple of different varieties of vegetables and not nearly the daily amount recommended.
- The additional focus was on buying local, and promoting shopping at Farmer's Markets.
- The session would be held early in the growing season, and people were not familiar with shopping at farmer's markets.

*If you feel like an extra challenge, speculate what the designer learned during the LNRA that was the impetus for the changes in topic #2.*



What is the desired change the organization wants to see back at work or home?

If, after working to narrow your content, you believe you still have too much content, ask yourself and other stakeholders – like the team leader, the supervisor, head of training, etc. – which pieces of content are the most critical? Why? How does it matter? Continue to winnow down content from broad and general to specific and immediate until you have a reasonable amount of content for the allotted time (more on this below).

### 3. Check Your Work: Focus on Time and Location

The WHEN and WHERE are boundaries that can help you determine what content you can and will teach..

These are the sorts of questions it's important to ask about the WHEN and WHERE as they relate to content:

- What can someone reasonably learn in the time available?
- What will and will not be available in the venue and the space, and what resources will and won't be available?
- If you have only thirty minutes, what does this indicate about what can realistically be achieved? If, for instance, you are teaching a computer program and will only have one computer for every three people versus one for every person, what will you do differently?

When I used to teach parenting and child development to teen parents in their homes, the children were often a part of this experience. The room we had available could be small or large, depending on the home; in either case, participants could include just the mom and me, or the mom, her friend, a bunch of children, me and a ringing phone. We had only one-and-a-half hours each month, and I had other visits to drive to as well. In order to be accountable to the teen parents in any home scenario and to ensure I kept my promise about what would be taught, I had to limit the content to what was reasonable under the most challenging circumstances. The WHERE and WHEN of each visit imposed limitations and offered resources. Having the children there, for example, allowed me to model age-appropriate activities the parent could do with their child, as well as notice and affirm the parent's application of whatever social, physical or emotional concept or technique I was teaching for that age group.

This chapter, and most approaches to content refinement (narrowing in on the “best” choices for our WHAT), are often written as though they are linear, a step-by-step process. The reality, though, is that refining content can circle and spiral as you reflect, write, ask questions, study, come up with new ideas, and let go of the things you do just because you like to do them, or have always done them! You wander, refine and move closer and closer until you finally land on the content that is most needed for this particular group and situation. You can think of this as “better choice now” information.

## Checking Assumptions about Content

“Better choice now” information always comes from our Learning Needs and Resources Assessment activities (ASK, STUDY and OBSERVE), and/or after the training is over!

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I asked a number of Dialogue Education practitioners the following question: Who has a favorite question, strategy, or axiom that helps you narrow in on the ‘right’ content?

Here’s one great response:

*Great question. For a very long time I did not write the WHAT since I thought it was captured in the WHAT FOR. I was SO wrong.*

*I find everyone ALWAYS wants to provide too much WHAT for the WHEN [too much content]. One thing that has helped me is to tie the WHAT to the WHY. My question to the group is, when thinking about the outcome of this training, the WHY, what is the most important information they need to know? What is the procedure or process needed to gain this outcome? Sometimes asking, “What are the tasks people do to get this outcome?” can help them articulate the WHAT. Writing these tasks on 3x5 cards helps make this easy to manipulate.*

*So, as the good educator, your question raises another question. One of the most difficult aspects to capture with subject matter experts is what they do automatically, “What unconscious decisions do they make because they have done this so many times?” It’s often important but hardest to capture. For example, when you see a red light you have to*



*think about moving your foot from gas to brake, but weather conditions and the many unconscious decisions vary the process. It seems the exceptions are also often very important. How do we capture and thus develop learning around variable aspects of the WHAT?*

–Sue Button, Performance Improvement Consultant

## 4. Check Your Work: Focus on the WHO and the WHY

This section offers a few more questions for you to consider when you are choosing content, with two examples that depict how the answers to some of the questions changed what was taught.

Scan the following questions, decide which you have already answered or attended to, and choose and respond to any that will help you finalize or improve your content decisions.

### The WHO

- What do they already know about this topic?
- Are you sure?
- What must they know to be able and willing to do, see or feel in order for the content to be most useful now and desirable to be used back at home or work?
- What knowledge, skills, and attitudes can be drawn out, acknowledged and built upon from the group, and what needs to be added or created?

### The WHY

- Who else cares about the change as a result of the learning event?
- How do they describe the desired change?
- How will they assess these changes?
- How does this compare to your current thoughts and draft design?
- How might your understanding differ from the individuals who will actually attend the course?
- Do you need to do more LNRA work (ASK, STUDY or OBSERVE) to be able to answer these questions?

Here are two examples of how one more review of the WHY changed either the emphasis or a significant aspect of the original content:

General Topic	Was	“Better choice now”
1. Infant Nutrition	Breastfeeding	Five ways to increase family (especially the husband’s) support and participation in choosing and continuing to breastfeed your infant
2. Effective Budgeting	Using spreadsheets	How to use spreadsheets to depict and analyze cash flow needs

In another example, content changes also needed to be made. The Asthma Unit was assisting with staff training in a clinic. Their original content was Asthma Management, but what they found out through phone interviews was that asthma was not prevalent in this particular population and neighborhood, and only two of the ten participants would be working with asthma patients. The decision was made to change the overall focus to Chronic Disease Management. They also found that the training was actually a part of a larger employment development initiative, so they carefully crafted, where possible, how this content was relevant within the contexts of their employment development initiative and this training course.

Unfortunately, the clinic could not provide the opportunity for Asthma staff members to make a site visit during the LNRA process, and it wasn’t until the first session was over that they discovered:

- That while they knew the participants had very limited English language skills, they did not realize that “little skill” also meant no confidence in their ability to write even a word or two of English; and,
- The room that they taught in was jam-packed, making pair work difficult and small group work all but impossible.

The next time this course was held, Asthma staff made sure that participants had no obligation to write; a scribe wrote down responses when that was useful. Staff members also pared back the content so

that there was more time for comprehension. The emphasis at this stage in the project shifted to reinforcing basic employee skills rather than focusing on a deeper understanding of public health issues, including chronic diseases and their management. The following chart depicts how this discovery helped the designers slightly, but meaningfully, modify the content:

General topic	Subtopic	Was	“Better choice now”
Chronic Disease Management	Active listening	Active listening to help a patient develop an effective action plan	Active listening to understand concerns and encourage the patient to follow through on an action plan.

What attitudes do you notice that are implied within the above more specific content descriptions? How might attitudes affect the way you go about creating a learning task?



## YOUR TASK

Use the worksheet that follows, if you like, to list the individual chunks of content you will teach, and work through each of the four steps towards selecting the “best” content.

Once you’ve made your final decisions you may want to fill in the content section – the WHAT - on your 8 Steps of Design worksheet where you completed the other five steps.



## REMEMBER

You are looking for what skills, knowledge and attitudes must be taught or taken into consideration so that learners leave with what they need to be successful back home or at work.

If you would like to make the learning-transfer-impact continuum even more explicit in your work, consider taking GLP’s course, Evaluation by Design, and explore membership in the American Evaluators Association ([eval.org](http://eval.org)).

