

Merrill's First Principles Applied to Learning Interviewing Skills

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Tales from the Field, a monthly column, consists of reports of evidence-based performance improvement practice and advice, presented by graduate students, alumni, and faculty of Boise State University's Instructional and Performance Technology department.

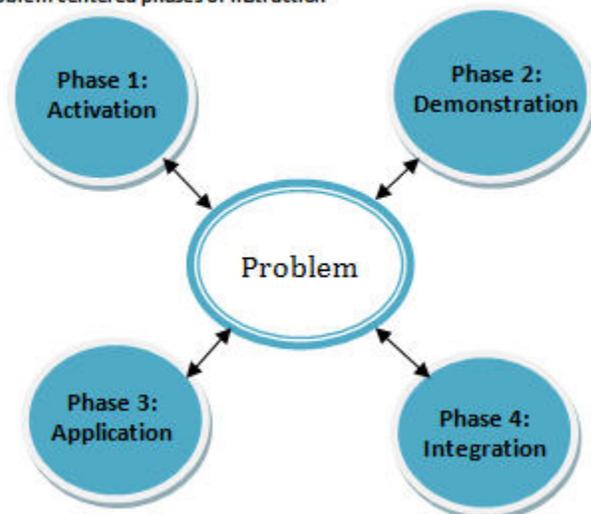
Overview

Stratagem is a consulting firm that provides Information Technology (IT) solutions and staffing services to clients in various industries. Concerned about the economic downturn and possible loss of business, Stratagem's Learning Services group requested an intervention that would focus on improving their instructional designers' (IDs) probability of getting hired onto a client project. Performance and cause analyses indicated that IDs did not know how to effectively describe their skills and experience during a client interview. As a result, the goal was a training intervention to enable IDs to develop stories that would effectively connect their prior experience to the needs of a potential client.

To achieve this goal, the ID team used Merrill's (2002) "First Principles of Instruction" as its design model because of its emphasis on problem-centered learning. This ensures a continuous focus on a real-world problem or challenge through the four instructional phases shown in Figure 1:

- Phase 1 - **Activation** of prior experience by citing or providing knowledge or experience to prepare the learner for new information.
- Phase 2 - **Demonstration** by showing the process/concept; not just talking about it.
- Phase 3 - **Application** by using the knowledge/skill to solve a problem.
- Phase 4 - **Integration** of skills into real-world situations using the knowledge or skills outside the classroom.

Figure 1: Problem-centered phases of instruction



Application

Based on the learning objectives, the design team created three lessons:

- Formulating a Story
- Arranging the Story Details
- Composing a Story

Each lesson stepped through the four phases shown in Figure 1. Following this process avoided a “data dump” and ensured that the ID consultants learned relevant skills. Throughout the design process, the team focused on the performance goal of developing an effective story for use during a client interview.

The course kicked off with a case study, which provided context and outlined the “problem” that that the training would address.

Then, each lesson asked the learners to recall a familiar situation (activation) related to interviewing. Next, learners were shown what was expected through techniques such as expanding on the initial case study, providing examples and non-examples of what went into effective stories, and providing tips and pointers to use on the job (demonstration).

This was followed by opportunities to practice preparing their own story materials by recalling, collecting, and organizing facts from their own resumes and experience (application). Lastly, to wrap up each lesson, learners took notes and reflected on the topic by coming up with their own tips and best practices (integration).

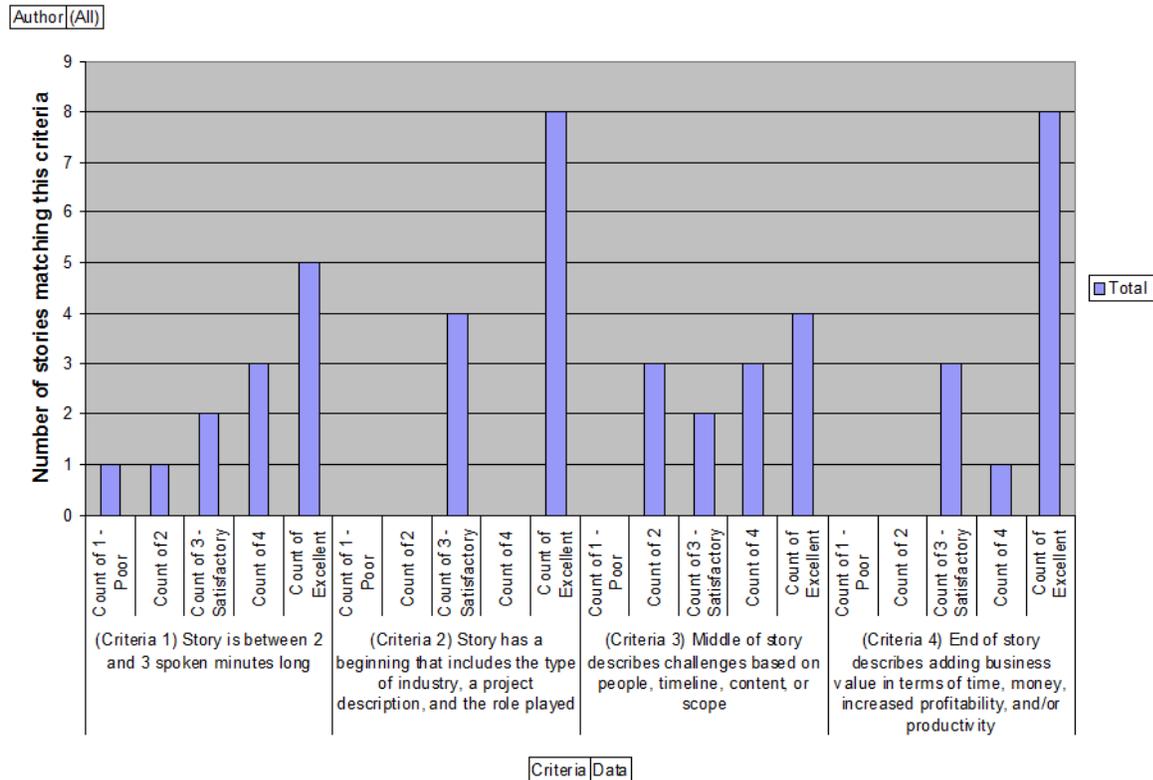
To conclude the course, an assessment was administered that required using a sample job posting as the basis for creating a story that could be used during an interview for that job.

Results

A pilot test was conducted involving 40% of the ID consultants considered to be the target audience. The objective of the course was to have each learner write three stories that matched designated criteria. The results of the pilot test and Level 2 evaluation showed that the training was effective.

As Figure 2 shows, of the 12 stories written, at least 75% were rated as “satisfactory” or better in meeting the criteria. Some criteria were rated as 100% “satisfactory” or better. For criteria with more mixed results, it was concluded that too much detail was required, making the stories too long. These conclusions were supported by comments provided during Level 1 evaluation. However, the issue was not with the technique of using Merrill's First Principles, but rather in how extensively they were employed. We found that it is possible to apply “too much” of Merrill's Principles, resulting in cumbersome or overly time-consuming exercises.

Figure 2: Results of pilot test and how well learners met assessment criteria



IPT-Grounded Advice

- Use problem-based instruction because it is a more effective means of instruction than is instruction that is segregated from the real-world task it is meant to address.
- Use an instructional model that supports problem-based learning, such as Merrill's first principles of instruction.
- Incorporate practice and assessments to ensure transfer of knowledge.
- Employ instructional methods for the learner to integrate what they have learned with their future activities.

References

Merrill, M. D. (2002). First principles of instruction. *Educational Technology Research & Development*, 50(3), 43-59.

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