

# Sad, but true: The “Big Bird Syndrome” in Training

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Want to get outstanding ratings from your students? Entertain them! Don't worry about content or learning – just keep them happy. You can even flunk them; they'll still love you, as long as you did a good job presenting the material.

This is the unfortunate conclusion from a research project I completed several years ago. My original intent was to apply the job satisfaction theories of Fred Herzberg (1959) to measure satisfaction with training. The hope was to come up with some ways of improving on the current methodology for measuring end of course satisfaction – what we in the business call “smile sheets” – which is largely based on Kirkpatrick's model (1959). Herzberg's job satisfaction work has been successfully transferred to the field of customer satisfaction with products and services, so – since training is a service – it seemed a logical next step.

Alas, it was not to be. Using a validated questionnaire designed to tie together Herzberg's and Kirkpatrick's models, 150 trainees in 15 different training programs taught by six different organizations including several industries and a couple college programs in Northeast Ohio, blew away the hypotheses. The net result of the study is summarized in the table below:

$(\chi^2 < .10)$		Training Achieved Purpose?	
		<b>Irrelevant</b> (Either Yes or No)	
Delivery was Adequate?	<b>Yes</b>	High Satisfaction & Low Dissatisfaction	
	<b>No</b>	Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction are Unpredictable	

Each trainee was measured on four factors: (1) Did they achieve success in the training? (2) Was the training delivery adequate? (3) Were they satisfied with the training? And (4) Were they dissatisfied with the training? See the footnote for a brief explanation of these measurements.

Whether trainees did well in the training or not turned out to be a non-issue. It made no difference at a chi-square confidence level of .10 or better (.001 on one hypothesis). If the delivery of the training was at least adequate, high satisfaction and low dissatisfaction were assured. If delivery was not at least adequate, there was still a better than 50% chance that trainees would report high satisfaction and low dissatisfaction.

Are you beginning to feel less smug about your 4.966 rating out of 5.00 on the course evaluations? **The results of this study indicate that trainees clearly value form over substance.**

What are the implications of this?

- (1) Trainee evaluations of training (Kirkpatrick's 1<sup>st</sup> level represented by typical "smile sheets") are of negligible value. The only certain purpose is to provide a means of bringing closure to the class – that is, trainees seem to expect and appreciate the chance to give feedback and would probably not believe how irrelevant it really is. Also, the narrative (subjective) comments may occasionally be useful, but they tell us nothing of what the trainees really learned and frequently tell us nothing about either the content or process of the training. The scalar ratings (objective) are ephemeral and should not be viewed as a true measure of anything.
- (2) Satisfaction and dissatisfaction with training clearly are unrelated to a person's success in the training or to the content of the training. They are only related to the process by which the training occurred. Examples of "process" include such things as an appropriate and adequate variety of training styles (not just lecture, for example), support by appropriate learning aids (handouts, visuals, simulations, lab work), tests that seemed fair in context, facilities, etc.
- (3) True measures of the success of training need to be made at Kirkpatrick's 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup> levels to be accurate. These are – respectively – that the trainee has actually acquired the expected knowledge and skill, that the trainee has been able to apply the skill on the job, and that such application has made a measurable difference to the organization.

So, if you want to insure good trainee ratings, it pays to design and present the material in an interesting, entertaining manner. If you want them to learn, that'll probably help as well. But recall the story of the two kids and their dog out for a walk. One kid says, "I taught Rex to whistle!" The other kid says, "I don't hear him whistling." And the first kid replies, "I said I taught him – I didn't say he learned." To make sure they've learned, you need to go to the higher levels of measurement: test them during class at both the knowledge and skill level and work with those in the real world (advisory committees, supervisors, surveys, etc.) to see if what they take to the job really gets applied and makes a difference to the organization.

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Footnote: How the four factors were defined and measured:

- (1) Did they achieve success in the training? This was measured by a grade or class ranking. If letter grades were awarded, a C or better was a success, unless everyone received a C or better (what I call the Lake Wobegon Syndrome), in which case the top two-thirds of the class was designated as successful (by comparison).
- (2) Was the training delivery adequate? Adequacy in subjective issues is a function of prior expectations. The training was adequate if trainees rated it equal to or better than what they anticipated.
- (3) Were they satisfied with the training? Trainees were asked to rate the content of the course on a Likert scale.
- (4) Were they dissatisfied with the training? Trainees were asked to rate the training environment on a Likert scale.

Note: Herzberg's model treats satisfaction and dissatisfaction as parallel, not opposite concepts, with different causes. It is, of course, possible to be both satisfied and dissatisfied with a training program. In the prior applications of the model, satisfaction is tied largely to the nature of the task and success at doing it, while dissatisfaction is tied largely to conditions under which the task is done. A number of other checks and balances were applied to the results. If you'd like more details, contact me.