RealityPlus™

Increasing Value Through Performance-Based Training

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Introduction

RealityPlus™ is an exciting new sub-brand for Learning Tree Courses. It was conceived in late 2005 by a team of Learning Tree authors, product managers and world-renowned instructional design experts. Their challenge was to develop a new generation of high-quality management education courses that embraced contemporary instructional design concepts, were highly relevant in today's technology-intensive management environments, and helped learners more effectively master *and apply* new knowledge and skills than traditional approaches to management training.

The strategy the RealityPlus team employed focused on the attendees' experience in the classroom. The team conducted interviews with customers, instructors, attendees and the sales personnel to figure out what kind of management-training experience attendees desired and needed. They then took the insight they gained and aligned it with established, research-based instructional models, processes, and strategies that focus on performance. The result is a customer-driven, research-based approach for creating efficient, effective and appealing learning experiences.

realityplus™

Management Education for the Real World

Learning Tree International's customers stake their future on the performance of their people. That's why training programs that emphasize on-the-job performance are in demand. Such programs are seen by customers and learners alike as being efficient, effective and appealing. Furthermore, research conducted independently by two noted educational thinkers, Neil Rackham and Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan, indicates that more content doesn't equal more learning. In fact, it can lead to what's called the "content trap," which is when content is added to a course for the purpose of enabling learners to understand and recall everything. This approach is based upon the false correlation between how much you know and your on-the-job performance. It also falsely assumes that there is one single body of content that guarantees perfect performance.

Value, therefore, depends on training that prepares people for on-the-job performance. And that's the promise of Learning Tree's new RealityPlus Courses.

Foundations of RealityPlus

The heart of RealityPlus is performance-based training, which focuses on practical skills. Using this approach, Learning Tree designed learning experiences to strongly align with the on-the-job tasks people perform in the workplace. Performance-based training is different from topic-based training in that performance-based courses do not teach a body of knowledge emphasizing facts, concepts, and other abstract content. Rather, course-based experiences focus on teaching attendees the real-world skills they need to be immediately productive when they return to work. This model has long been successful for Learning Tree's technology-based courses.

Performance-based training is well documented and researched, and is known by many different names. For example, in medical schools, it is called *"problem-based learning."* In some organizations, it is referred to as *"goal-based scenarios."* In more general discussions, you might hear it described with the words *"situated learning," "authentic activities"* or *"cognitive apprenticeship."* Whatever name is used, the approach describes a learning experience that:

- Has real-world relevance
- Requires learners to define tasks and sub-tasks to complete activities

- Provides the opportunity to collaborate
- Allows for competing solutions and a variety of outcomes
- Aims to create polished products or job-related tools valuable in their own right.

The engine behind performance-based training is simulation. Courses that focus on hard skills such as project management, user requirements and risk analysis employ *production simulations.* These simulations engage attendees in the design and development of one or more products aligned with the focus of the course. Production simulations engage attendees for multiple days and can have computer-supported components that add variability and dynamics to the simulation. Soft-skill courses such as communication, assertiveness and negotiation employ a different type of simulation called *fluency simulations*. Rather than one simulation that spans several days, these mini-simulations (an hour or less in duration) provide a variety of realistic situations in which attendees practice skills repetitively for speed and accuracy, as well as to increase confidence.

While simulations offer the "glue" that holds the learning experience together, RealityPlus Courses integrate a host of other innovative instructional strategies that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of learning new knowledge and skills, such as:

- *Interactive discussion content*, which engages attendees as active learners during instructor-facilitated presentations.
- *Joggles*, which are short activities that put attendees in unexpected situations and help them to examine issues from different viewpoints and perspectives.
- *Authentic examples*, which give participant attendees a clear picture of the work products and job-related aids they will create.
- *Collaborative activities* involving index cards, sticky notes, and other common materials that provide opportunities for attendees to elicit and share customer knowledge and best practices.

The RealityPlus Experience

So what's it like to be a participant in a RealityPlus experience? In the most common implementation, what RealityPlus Courses do first is give learners a role. Instructors might tell attendees that they are a business analyst, project manager, software quality assurance specialist, or other role relevant to the course topics. Instructors then follow up the role assignment by presenting attendees with their mission and context. For example, the mission may be to complete an interesting project with one or more key deliverables.

The projects and contexts that the course designers select combine one part fantasy, two parts technical possibility, and a large dose of reality. In other words, it wouldn't be surprising to see in a few years that what attendees worked on in class became an actual product or service sold on the market. The purpose of these types of experiences is to stimulate attendee motivation, not only through fun, but through cognitive engagement.

The RealityPlus experience is one in which attendees like going to "work" every day. They want to stay after class to talk with the instructor about "the project." And as the week progresses, they are eager and intrigued to learn how their project's story unfolds. Most importantly, at the end of the experience, attendees walk away knowing that they:

- Successfully completed the project
- Acquired the skills they need to perform effectively on the job
- Are confident and ready to apply those skills when they get back to work

Since RealityPlus Courses are process and product focused, a common question customers have is: "How do people learn the skills to make the product?" The diagram below concisely details the process.

The core of the course is represented by inputs, process and outputs related to the simulated task, which are developed by the course designers. For example, in Course 315: *Developing User Requirements: The Key to Project Success*, attendees start by receiving business documents and other supporting materials ("authentic inputs") from the instructor. They then work through a process to create a User Requirements Document ("authentic output"). As attendees work through this process, they participate in short, focused lessons that build expertise and examine best practices (the "cloverleaves"). For example, the instructor might teach a lesson on writing well-formed requirements, or demonstrate how to construct a process map.

Using this structure, the RealityPlus experience incorporates everything that exists in today's typical Learning Tree classroom and much more. Instructors continue to use MagnaLearn™, Learning Tree's proprietary instructional delivery system, as the primary presentation vehicle. Static diagrams are enhanced by animation that helps to clarify or demystify key course concepts.

In addition to slide presentations, many RealityPlus Courses incorporate custom-produced videos that help tell the story of the project or demonstrate critical skills. Through these videos, attendees might find themselves as a participant at a meeting where they learn the business drivers for a project. Or attendees might take on the role of a worker who is helping a virtual co-worker interview a stakeholder for project requirements.
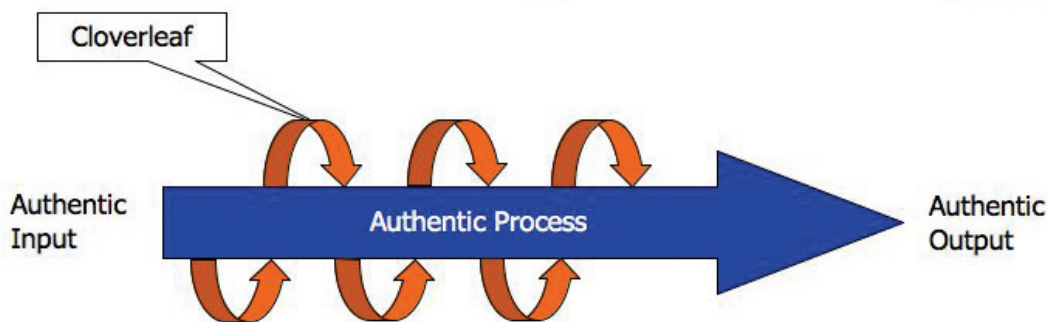

Diagram representing the RealityPlus experience

Scene from a sales negotiation scenario,
Course 341: Negotiation Skills

Other technological innovations incorporated into courses include custom computer-based simulations and software tools. For example, Course 218: *User and System Requirements for Software Projects* features a use-case development application that attendees can use for class activities. By practicing various scenarios and trying out different approaches using the computer-based simulations, course attendees can do much more and in less time than is possible using a paper-based approach. In addition, attendees can take the applications home and use them on the job!

Proprietary use-case application from Course 218: User and System Requirements for Software Projects

Similarly, Course 296 uses a computer-based simulation that puts the learner in the role of Project Manager, working in a real-time project environment and using computer software to assist decision making.

Proprietary simulation from Course 296: Project Management: Skills for Success

Proprietary simulation from Course 296: Project Management: Skills for Success

RealityPlus Delivers Measurable Performance

It is one thing to go to a course and have a great time. It is quite another thing to bring back skills that provide an organization a return on investment. Training managers, human resource directors and other decision-making customers expect measurable performance from training programs.

To achieve measurable performance, it's imperative to use a systematic process to design training courses that positively impact the bottom line. We design all RealityPlus Courses using a process based upon the ADDIE (Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement and Evaluate) model. The ADDIE model and its derivatives are well recognized in the training community as the gold standard for creating training.

The Design, Development and Implementation phases of Learning Tree's RealityPlus development process were detailed in the preceding sections. The next section describes the real drivers of measurable performance, the Analysis and Evaluation phases of the model.

In the Analysis phase, RealityPlus Course authors and designers assess performance problems in the workplace to derive the business need, course goal and learning objectives related to a set of skills:

- The business need is the problem or opportunity an organization wants to resolve.
- The course goal describes the on-the-job performance the course endeavors to deliver that contributes to resolving the business need .
- The learning objectives are specific, performance-oriented, measurable behaviors learners must acquire to achieve the course goal.

Learning Tree Course authors are uniquely positioned to develop performance-based training programs, since they are practicing professionals who observe these needs every day in client organizations.

In the Evaluation phase, measurement is the focus. Measurement ensures that the needs, goals and objectives specified in the Analysis phase were accurately addressed and met. To properly set performance expectations and their evaluation, each RealityPlus Course presents course goals and key learning objectives to attendees at the beginning of the course. Additionally, at the beginning of each chapter, the course presents learning objectives associated with that chapter, and then reviews the learning objectives at the end of each chapter to ensure learner understanding of those objectives and how they were achieved during the chapter.

When it comes to measuring achievement of learning objectives, you'll find that RealityPlus Courses are much more robust than traditional courses and programs. RealityPlus Courses measure achievement of learning objectives through a combination of authentic, in-class work products and criterion-referenced, multiple choice exams. RealityPlus exam questions focus on performance, enhancing the predictive value of the exam in terms of on-the-job performance. Ideally, what RealityPlus offers is the ability to track improvements in employee performance gained through course participation. Using this information, organizations can analyze how performance leads to the resolution of the business need. *That's* the kind of value that can be delivered by contemporary management education programs.

The RealityPlus Benefits

The RealityPlus value proposition manifests itself as a collection of features and benefits aligned with two specific groups:

- The organizations that purchase our courses (represented by training managers, HR directors, and other Learning and Performance executives)
- The attendees who participate in our courses

For organizations:

Feature	Benefit
High-quality, world-class content	Adoption of best-in-class know-how
Systematic development process	Employee skills are aligned with and contribute to addressing key business needs
High-quality, unique, engaging learning experiences	Increased likelihood of employees applying new skills on the job
Performance-based measures	Documented evidence that skills were acquired
Collaborative learning activities	Leveraging ideas from other domains and disciplines

For attendees:

Feature	Benefit
High-quality, world-class content	Attendees know they are doing things the "right" way, using the best-known methods
Active Learning: More time "doing" than just listening	Attendees increase their confidence that they can successfully perform required tasks
Discovery-based learning	Attendees improve performance through sharing ideas and trying out possibilities with others
Immersion: Real-world simulations using Rich Media	Attendees are engaged more and transfer the skills they learn to their jobs faster
Computer-managed learning	Attendees do more in less time
Clear standards of performance	Attendees know exactly when they are performing well and have mastered the material

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About Learning Tree International

Learning Tree International is a leading worldwide provider of vendor-independent training to managers and IT professionals in business and government organizations. Since 1974, over 1,700,000 course participants from over 13,000 organizations worldwide have enhanced their skills and extended their knowledge under the guidance of expert instructors with real-world experience. Learning Tree develops, markets and delivers a broad, proprietary library of instructor-led courses focused on the latest information technologies, management practices and key business skills.

Learning Tree International annually trains over 87,000 professionals in its Education Centers around the world. Learning Tree also provides training in a number of additional cities and on site at customer locations in 26 countries. For more information about Learning Tree products and services, please call **1-800-843-8733**, or visit our Web site at **www.learningtree.com**

About the Author

Darryl L. Sink & Associates, Inc.

Darryl L. Sink & Associates provides a full range of instructional design products, services and workshops. They specialize in analyzing organizational training and non-training needs, and designing, developing and producing solutions across training media and delivery systems.

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