



The HAZMAT Instructor Perspective on: Providing an Engaging Classroom Experience

As an instructor, how important is it to be engaging in the classroom, and what kind of difference does this make to the students' learning experience?

Let's be honest. The majority of students would find a trip to the dentist for a root canal procedure preferable to having to sit through multiple days of hazmat training. The US and international regulations are, by their nature, dry, exceedingly wordy, and chock full of dreaded "legalese" that can be confusing at times, especially for first time students.

During my introductions at the start of a class I usually ask the question: "How many of you volunteered to have hazardous materials duties?" Almost no one ever raises their hand. Then I ask: "How many of you were "voluntold" to have hazardous materials duties?" Just about every person will smile and raise their hands. I think most of us, including myself, fall into the latter category.

So, how do we as instructors, combat this quite normal and common apprehension/aversion to training?

For me, the smiles in reaction to the "voluntold" question are my first visual key that I have begun the process of engaging the student. The importance of engaging the student cannot be overstated. Without it, we are just standing up there regurgitating information. Think of Ben Stein in the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, standing in front of the class and speaking in monotone (anyone...anyone?) while his students all look like they are being tortured to death by boredom.

Hazmat employees all have an enormous and important responsibility for ensuring the safe transport of hazardous materials. As instructors, it's our job to ensure that students leave our training classes with the knowledge to do so. If we "Ben Stein" them, then that won't be the case.

A great first objective in class is to get the students to relax and feel comfortable. This is important to me as I encourage students to ask questions (no such thing as a stupid question in hazmat class) and share experiences and challenges that they face in their jobs with their fellow classmates. I'll have the students introduce themselves and give a bit of information on their companies and their responsibilities. It presents a good opportunity for everyone to get to know each other and often presents them with good networking possibilities. The class introductions can eat up some valuable class time, but in the end that time is well-spent in the interest of getting students comfortable and keeping them engaged. This also helps the instructor to know what types of hazardous materials the students are dealing with so that they can be incorporated into the class. Anything that makes the training relatable to the student is a win for both the student and the instructor.

Simplifying the regulations whenever possible helps immensely as well. I often jokingly tell my students that my official job title is "Plain English Translator of Regulations". Just take a look at the definition of the word "Person" in 49 CFR 171.8 for an example of the need for this. It's painful...

Student boredom is the enemy of every instructor. The lecturing, PowerPoint reading, monotone speaking "Sage on the Stage" approach wears thin after about an hour. On the flip side, the trainer who makes excruciating efforts to be entertaining while skimping on actual class content is doing nobody any favors either.



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Using class exercises and the occasional game to break up and review the regulatory lecturing is very helpful. As an instructor, you get pretty adept at reading body language. After lunch, around 2:30 or 3:00 pm (when students start yawning or looking at their phones or watches) is an especially good time to switch gears. At this point I like to use a game or even brief conversations of non-hazmat related topics, all of which can help in keeping the student engaged (and not to mention, awake).

Our students have a great responsibility to perform their hazmat duties in a compliant manner. As instructors, our primary goal is to maintain an environment that keeps them engaged and involved, and to provide them with competence and confidence in navigating the challenging regulatory turf.

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