

# SUCCESS for Teaching Assistant Professional Development

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**Abstract:** This paper reflectively applies the Motivating Opportunity Model (SUCCESS Model) to a successful redesign of a university teaching-assistant professional development program. It illustrates how the principles of motivation for perceptions, engagement and learning drawn from motivational theories inform the work of design. Both the SUCCESS Model and the redesign of the TA development have been previously detailed in separate scholarly publications. The goal of this integration is to illustrate application of the SUCCESS model in a demonstrably effective instructional redesign. This paper introduces the project and the motivational model briefly, then reflectively details how the SUCCESS components are implemented in the TA design project.

**Keywords:** motivation, instructional design, teaching assistants, professional development

*Success is neither magical nor mysterious. Success is the natural consequence of consistently applying the basic fundamentals.*

*~Jim Rohm*

The quality of foundational undergraduate instruction in American universities depends to a large degree on the skill and investment of graduate teaching assistants (TAs) (Marincovich, 1998). TAs need effective, appropriate professional development that offers both meaningful foundations and strategically useful tools for application (Hardré & Burris, 2012). Many TAs receive very limited preparation and mentoring before they begin teaching, so the design of what they do receive is crucial (Hardré & Chen, 2006). In addition, many TAs have little motivation to invest in learning to teach, given their commonly-held perceptions that teaching has little importance for their current and future professional aspirations (Ronkowski, 1998).

## TA Professional Development Redesign

A team of designers was challenged to redesign the general professional development workshop for all new teaching assistants (TAs) in a research-extensive university (Hardré & Burris, 2012). The design goal was to transform the existing series of discrete one-hour sessions by guest faculty and trainers into a more coherent approach to TA professional development, using strategies grounded in current learning and motivational theory.

**Contexts and timing.** The context-of-instruction was a face-to-face, three-day training and development event, sponsored by the university's Center for Teaching and Learning Development. It occurred the week

before classes began, after all of the new TAs had arrived on campus. As to contexts-of-use, they would transfer to classrooms and labs across campus, some teaching independently and others facilitating lab and discussion sections linked to faculty-taught courses. Some would have ongoing departmental support, coaching and mentoring for teaching, while others would not. All new TAs were required by their hiring departments to attend the training event.

**Learners.** The learners were 210 new university teaching assistants, hired to teach foundational courses across disciplines, in hard sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities. They were diverse in age, race, gender, background, teaching knowledge, degree program, career trajectory and professional experience. About half knew exactly what course(s) they would begin teaching the following week, and three-quarters knew what format of class (lecture, lab or discussion section). Some had taught elsewhere, but all were new TAs in this institution. As a whole, this was a diverse group of busy, educated adult learners.

**Task.** At minimum the learners had to be equipped with relevant knowledge and useful strategies to survive their initial venture into university teaching, including basic learning theory, general information about teaching in higher education and basic institutional information. Secondary objectives included an introduction to course/lesson design, and instilling value for teaching as part of their current and future professional roles.

**Design strategy.** Critical constraints included the short time (3 days) and limited facilities (one large lecture hall and three regular classrooms set up for lectures), as well as the number of TAs and the diversity of their transfer needs and contexts. The administrative clients chose presentation-with-discussion as the primary design strategy. The design team worked with the administrative clients, identifying essential content and organizing it into general sessions (attended by all) and breakouts (chosen by learners). General sessions were: course design, first-day strategies, instructional strategies and communication, and assessment. Breakout sessions included: motivating learners, creating positive classroom learning environments, three types of format-focused sessions (lectures, labs and discussions), inquiry-based teaching, and teaching through writing. On the last day, all TAs gave a short lesson, which was videotaped. They received a copy of the video and participated in a group critique of their videos. Materials and media included PowerPoint slides and handouts, a manual in which learners

could record notes and applications, and assessment and feedback forms.

**Evaluation.** TAs found the event as a whole well designed to meet their needs, and felt that the activities and content made a notable contribution to their learning and development (Hardré & Burris, 2012). Learners were able to identify both specific knowledge they had gained, and some positive shifts in their values and beliefs about teaching (Hardré & Burris, 2012). Based on these outcomes, the redesigned ATA event was judged to be successful.

### The SUCCESS Model of Motivation for Design

The Motivating Opportunities Model for Performance SUCCESS (Hardré, 2009) was developed in response to the identified need for a new, more robust and up-to-date motivational model for instructional designers (Hardré, 2003). It was designed both as a conceptual model to support designers' understanding of motivation theories and strategies, and as a procedural framework for translating that understanding into designing effective learning and performance environments (Hardré, 2009). It exists to promote engagement through integrating comprehensive motivational strategies throughout instruction, and is designed to be useful in practice, through flexibility in process and application (Hardré & Miller, 2006).

SUCCESS is transtheoretical, as it integrates constructs and strategies from multiple motivational theories and schools of thought, to achieve currency and comprehensiveness into a usable model for today's designers (Hardré, 2003). It does not constrain designers structurally into prescriptive or formulaic design approaches, nor assume a particular epistemological stance. Instead, it can be adaptively implemented across design environments and contexts, and with any global ID model or strategic approach (Hardré, 2009). It bridges the gap between theory and practice for ID professionals by:

1. Reframing complex theories of motivation in practical ways
2. Translating theoretical components of psychology into relevant principles for design practice
3. Providing a structural and procedural framework for integrating them fluidly
4. Including social, contextual and assessment components of motivation
5. Supporting integration of motivation from initial analysis through implementation, evaluation and transfer.

The heart of the model is the SUCCESS mnemonic, presenting seven key components of motivational considerations:

- S: Situational** (contextual and access issues)
- U: Utilization** (and transfer issues)
- C: Competence** (focus on the development of skills & expertise)
  
- C: Content** (knowledge and information components)
- E: Emotional** (affective and personal response issues)
- S: Social** (group, interpersonal interactions, collaborative & relational issues)
- S: Systemic** (organizational and systems considerations with potential to facilitate performance improvement)

The Motivating Opportunities Model is design-focused, centered on the design elements and interactions in learning and performance environments, rather than on learner characteristics alone. It takes into account motivationally-relevant components of the task, learning and performance contexts, social setting and performance standards, as well as needs and characteristics of learners.

### SUCCESS Applied in the All-TA Redesign

The following section illustrates how the redesign of the All-TA professional development (ATA) exemplified motivational strategies informed by motivational theory and illustrated by the SUCCESS framework. Across all of the components, motivationally-sensitive design includes goals, expectations, confidence and uncertainty, and various levels of communication—when, where, how and by what/whom. The importance and effects of these motivational components are supported by the systematic evidence (Hardré & Burris, 2012).

#### **S: Situational** (contextual and access issues)

This component focuses on the nature of the learning and performance contexts, their support for autonomy, authenticity, access and control (both actual and perceived by learners). Learners provided with motivationally-positive situational features, such as choice about how they do tasks, and with access to materials and support resources tend to more readily engage and fit instruction to their needs (Brookfield, 1986; Pasqual-Leone & Johnson, 2004).

Much of the context design had been predetermined by the administrative client, based on learner availability and resource limitations. Within these confines, the designers infused as much interaction and introspection as was feasible, to promote personal meaningfulness and motivation.

The sessions invited TAs to consider what they knew about their own assignments and develop individualized applications of the key principles. This strategy supported personal ownership and choice, to offset the potentially demotivating pervasive awareness that this was a mandated event.

The positive messages and thematics linking the various sessions supported autonomous transfer and personal success expectations that leveraged the TAs' situational perspective. For example, to enhance perceived value for the teaching sessions, one trainer invited TAs to look around and realize that while nearly everyone in the room *aspired* to be a faculty member in a research university, (based on job availability) only one in eight of them was likely to get that job immediately on graduation, while the others would more likely begin their academic careers in professional roles that depended largely on teaching effectiveness.

Information access was ensured both at instruction (by handing TAs hard copy of materials packets) and ongoing (by uploading the materials in digital format to the online LMS).

#### **U: Utilization** (and transfer issues)

The utilization component focuses on facilitating transfer by bridging perceptual gaps from instruction to application, from the task and skills as learned, to the task and skills in authentic use. Learners need to recognize how, when and why they will need particular skills after instruction, and that recognition is most powerful when linked to their own personal goals and aspirations (Dweck, Mangels & Good, 2004; Beck, 2004).

1. Strategies to support utilization for a TA included a focus on practical methods and immediate needs (e.g., “First-Day Strategies”) so learners perceived them as appropriate for immediate/proximal use. This supported overall relevance and linked to their short-term (proximal) needs and goals.
2. All of the sessions included rich examples of real instances when the information being taught was necessary, to promote clear percep-

tions of how and when they were recommended for use.

3. The trainers encouraged the TAs to select a few key strategies/ideas from each session that they expected to use and focus on those. This invitation to focus and customize their learning supported feasible goal setting in what was for many a new area of learning. Given the range of needs and scope of information to cover those needs, this strategy also supported both individual autonomy (control and choice in their learning) and self-efficacy, as it gave them freedom/permission not to try to remember everything and instead to identify and select what would meet their perceived needs.

**C: Competence** (focus on the development of skills & expertise)

The competence component focuses on current and developing skills, task performance and feedback relative to learning targets and stated objectives. To develop toward professional competence, learners need to understand what standards exist, what knowledge and skills are important to learn, and how they are developing toward those goals as they progress (Alexander, 2004). Both actual and perceived competence (or self-efficacy) are important, and they are often different (Hardré, Ge & Thomas, 2007).

1. Trainers encouraged the TAs to share ideas and examples, and supported their ideas with positive feedback and elaborations. The support of their existing knowledge promoted perceived competence, and framing strategy suggestions as elaborations of what they had shared promoted the development of new knowledge linked to their prior knowledge.
2. The feedback documents asked TAs to identify what they had learned and expected to use along with *how* they could use it, supporting perceived self-efficacy for transfer and their metacognitive identification of key strategies from the broader content scope.
3. Instruction underscored the nature of competence in teaching as adaptive and situated in the class and discipline. Trainers explicitly strove to bridge from learners' prior knowledge and experience to their perceived needs and expectations, and linked skill learning to the institutional performance assessments.

**C: Content** (knowledge and information components)

The competence component focuses on motivational elements of how information is provided and developed through instruction, to support making knowledge accessible when it is needed for performance. Content should address the range of learners' needs, on degrees of novelty, challenge, relevance, and meaningfulness (Wlodkowski, 1999). The organization of information is also critical to sustaining interest and creating effective cognitive schema for later recall and transfer (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000).

1. The TAs needed a foundational standard of information (to address minimum information requirements) balanced by some degree of choice and control (to support individual relevance and autonomy). This balance was achieved with the structure of general and breakout sessions.
2. The designers built multiple types of information presentation and access into the content, with text and graphics, and provided both PowerPoint slides as handouts and a manual with further elaborations of the concepts. This strategy provided new information for learners at various levels of prior knowledge, including the simpler version for more novice learners to follow along with trainers, and more detailed information elaborated for more advanced learners. Motivationally, this strategy supported an appropriate level of challenge and novel information across a range of learners' prior knowledge and experience.
3. Past learners had perceived the old workshop sequence to be "disconnected", lacking coherence, which reduced its meaningfulness and threatened learners' ability to make linkages between sessions that could bolster their overall learning and engagement. To support perceived coherence (as well as cognitive schema-building), the redesigned sessions were systematically linked, with the breakouts detailing and illustrating key principles and ideas introduced in the general sessions. Trainers intentionally linked strategies introduced in the breakouts to more general ideas presented in general sessions, to integrate the content and support TAs' valuing and schema development for teaching.

**E: Emotional** (affective and personal response issues)

The emotional component focuses on personal, affective and perceptual factors with motivational effects on instructional effectiveness. Learners' affect and emotions come from past and present experiences, role models and relationships, self-perceptions and sources of anxiety, and they powerfully effect learning and development, with impacts on recall and transfer to performance (Dweck, Mangels & Good, 2004).

1. Trainers modeled productive learning goals with openness to new ideas, along with value for teaching as a skill to be learned well.
2. Trainers shared success and error or failure stories including their effects on students, to demonstrate the importance of attention to effective teaching and promote TAs' awareness of their potential to impact their students' futures.
3. Sessions included opportunities to acknowledge and share any negative affect and emotions regarding teaching and seek to remediate them with new strategies for success in similar circumstances.

**S: Social** (group, interpersonal interactions, collaborative & relational issues)

The social component focuses on interpersonal elements of instruction, how people learn and work together, communicate and interact with each other and with the teacher-trainer or system. Social aspects of physical or virtual learning spaces, opportunity to contribute ideas, perceived safety and respect, teacher-learner-peer social relationships, and anxiety about assessment and performance all influence how people learn and what they take away from instruction (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000).

1. Trainers shared their histories as TAs to build rapport and perceived understanding among TA learners.
2. In breakouts, the TAs were encouraged to share their concerns and engage in collaborative and cooperative problem-solving, with the trainers and with their peers.
3. Modeling by the trainers was a key here also, as was the degree of discussion and interactive contributions encouraged from TAs in the breakouts, to support peer community and demonstrate the interdisciplinary applications of the principles being presented.

**S: Systemic** (organizational and systems considerations with potential to facilitate performance improvement)

The systemic component focuses on elements that relate to the institution and organization in which the instruction and performance occur, and those to which they connect. Learners need to recognize how what they are learning fits into the larger context of their lives and needs. Beyond immediate context and utility, it is beneficial to frame instruction and its goals within the learner's organization and career (addressing both short term and long term goals) (Beck, 2004).

1. The separate breakouts were developed to meet needs for whichever type or format of course/section TAs were assigned.
2. In all sessions, trainers included examples from multiple disciplines and course types, to support perceived feasibility and relevance for broad transfer of the learned principles and strategies across teaching roles and contexts within the organization.
3. Sessions included systemic and organizational components of teaching processes (such as grading, enrollment, technology tools and facilities), to support perceived familiarity for systemic transfer and perceived compatibility with global features of the institution.

**Summary Implications for Design**

Using a tool like the Motivating Opportunities Model (with its SUCCESS mnemonic) as a systematic framework to scaffold design thinking can support the designer in integrating motivation into all levels of instruction. It supports all phases of design and prompts consideration of motivation into the design of materials, activities and environments, and into contexts-of-instruction as well as contexts-of-use, to facilitate learning and transfer.

Given the integrative relationships among motivational factors, and between motivation and learning (Dai & Sternberg, 2004), there will often be overlap among motivational considerations, influences and strategies for the seven SUCCESS components. However, using all seven enables designers to examine motivational issues and influences from multiple perspectives and supports more effective integration of motivation into all facets of instructional design.

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