

Evaluating and Selecting Certificate Programs

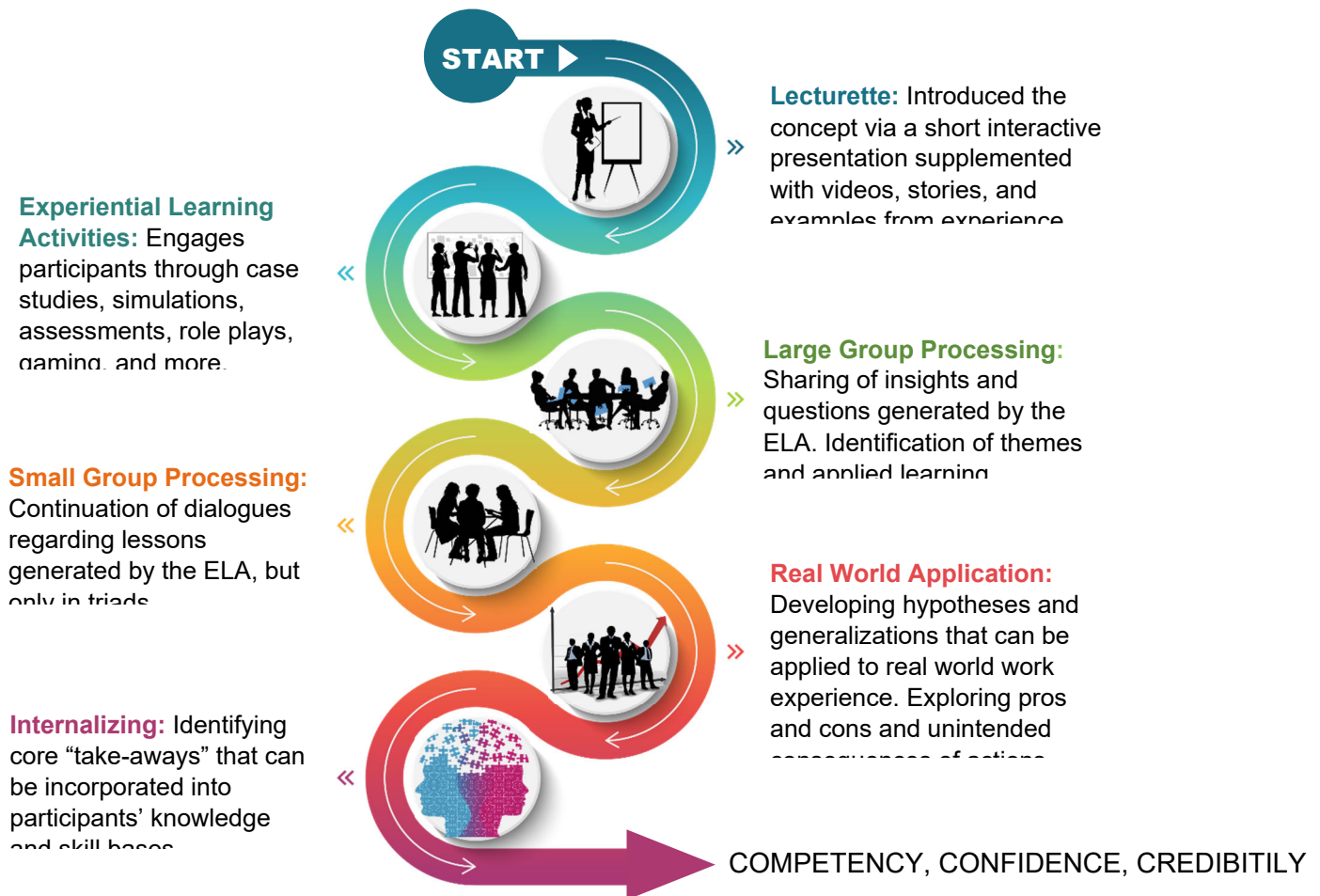
There are several certificate programs for OD and IO professionals. They vary in length, price, but most include an online webinar or virtual workshop. In this article I discuss the difference between generic online workshops and those that provide more value by incorporating multiple learning modalities as well as experiential and social learning methodologies.

Effective Learning Design

The effectiveness of a certification program depends heavily on its learning design, that is, how it is structured to foster retention and application on the job. It is a waste of money for someone to invest thousands of dollars on a professional certificate and quickly forget what was taught or be unable to apply its lessons. Here are some of the instructional design considerations that go into creating an effective certificate program.

Learning Modalities. Learning modalities are methods people employ to learn using four of their senses. There are four learning modalities: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile. A carefully crafted educational program will incorporate all of them. A more mundane program relies on auditory input with a visual background (think lecture and slide deck). Research has shown that this type of learning results in quickly forgotten content.

Sequential Learning Design. A well-designed program includes multiple learning instructional methods arranged sequentially to reinforce content, increase understanding, provide insights through experimentation and exploration, and facilitation that challenges participants to identify opportunities where lessons learned can be applied outside the workshop. When properly arranged and facilitated, this design increases content relevancy and retention.





Active or Experiential Learning. For learning to become part of someone's applied knowledge, that is, remembered and utilized, learners must be actively engaged and utilize multiple senses. They need to handle things, talk about them, explore them, challenged to use them, and be coached, or receive feedback. One of many ways to accomplish that is to introduce an experiential learning activity that supplements or expands on the lecturettes. Experiential learning that requires 1) participating in an activity designed to explore a concept, 2) sharing reactions and noting observations, 3) processing what happened, 4) extracting generalizations from the processing and connecting them to real world examples and applying them to similar or different situations. 5) Internalizing lessons learned and increasing competencies. That doesn't happen in a college lecture hall or most virtual video training events.

Learning Retention. According to an article written by Matt Bingham, "*10 Stats about Learning Retention You'll Want to Forget*," people forget more than half of the information presented after just one hour. After one day, the amount forgotten increases to 70 percent and after a month as much as 90 percent is forgotten. Part of the retention problem is that a lecture-and-deck training format does not make learners take an active part in the acquisition of knowledge. Instead, they sit and listen as the presenter drones on without doing anything more than taking notes (if that).

Microlearning. Microlearning is the process of "chunking" information into smaller pieces or modules. It is an old theory introduced by George A. Miller in 1965 and applied in modern instructional design processes. Professor Miller suggested that short-term memory could hold five to nine chunks of information at a time. Contemporary learning theory contends that small packets of content (chunks) narrowly focused on a topic, and effectively spaced creates more memorable, comprehensive content that can be better retained.

Social Learning. Most, if not all, virtual certificate programs include some aspects of social learning. These methods include interactive discussions, blogs, instant messaging, wikis, video chats and others. The most common practice is planned breakout groups during the online sessions or informal, ad hoc peer-group discussions that occurs outside the sessions. Social learning is best when people are free to discuss content from their own perspectives and add their own interpretations to what was presented.

Instructional Media and Learner Portals. The best instruction does not exist in a vacuum. It is supported by instructional media that supplements workshop content. For example, topical articles, digital case studies, videos, audio recordings, charts, theoretical or conceptual models, gaming, animations and infographics. These are presented to participants during the workshop or made available online, outside the workshop. Special websites, call learner portals host these materials and allow access to registered participants and certificate holders. As you can see, a well-designed and learner-focused certificate program includes many components, each carefully curated to facilitate learning and retention.

Teaching versus Facilitation

Facilitation is not the same as teaching. A teacher or lecturer is the expert at center stage who shares his or her knowledge with others. A teacher has a preset agenda from which he or she seldom varies. In fact, many teachers create lesson plans and have used them for years, updating them occasionally but mostly the lessons remain the same. They know these lessons so well that they can almost recite them by rote while running through slide decks consisting mostly of bulleted lists. To add a bit of variety, some lecturers take time for students to form into pairs, or small groups and discuss what was presented. Then, after the groups have met, a representative from the group shares what they discussed, the teacher tells them the key points to remember from the session. Teaching sessions and lectures are "teacher-centric and content-focused." The lesson plan identifies learning objectives and students are tested on what they retain. That is not what facilitators do.

A facilitator is several things. A facilitator is a pathfinder, a challenger, a questioner, bridge builder, encourager, supporter, catalyst, and host that establishes a trusting sharing environment. He or she is empathetic, emotionally intelligent, understands groups and group dynamics, reads body language, and can interpret intent, even if the person talking isn't aware of it. A facilitator is a process expert, able to ascertain where a group is and know what to do to help the group achieve its purposes.

Most facilitators are also trainers. They have objectives or outcomes they want to achieve. However, the process facilitators use to attain those outcomes are different from those of teachers. Facilitators present situations and activities that require participants to learn independently. Instead of telling participants what they should have learned, they encourage and challenge participants to surface their own learnings or take-aways from those situations and apply those insights to their real-life work situations. Effective facilitation is an emergent process.



Benefits of a Graduate Certificate

In February of 2020, Ohio University, wrote on its website, “*professionals looking for flexible, valued opportunities to strengthen their skills and become industry leaders should also consider the benefits of graduate certificates.*”

In 2017, 83 percent of the respondents of a study conducted by the *U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics* said that a certificate program improved their work skills, while 58 percent said it was useful in increasing their pay.

GradSchools.com contends that a graduate certificate can help a person gain marketable skills that will further their careers or find a new job in the same industry. Additionally, some people are finding that a college degree may not be enough to differentiate them from other graduates in a competitive job market. Adding a certificate to one’s resume is one way to instantly add knowledge and skills, making someone more employable and facilitate transitions into new fields. This may be especially helpful to those who have a bachelor’s degree and don’t want to incur additional student loan debt but do want to increase their knowledge, skills, and marketability.

Study.com reports that about 33 percent of people who hold certificates also have an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree, and over 60 percent of those people earned their certificate first. This suggest that a majority of people use certificates as a steppingstone to a college degree. Earning a certificate while taking classes towards a degree increases marketable skills quickly while still building an educational profile that can be added to later.

SimpliLearn.com notes that certified professionals were 2.7 times more likely to be identifies as a potential job candidate by prospective employers and 2.55 times more likely to be promoted than their non-certified counterparts. This benefit is also cited by Ohio University, “*A graduate certificate provides an additional certification on top of undergraduate education. This may give an additional advantage to qualifying for more sought-after and higher-paying jobs.*”

Selecting a Certificate Program

Changing attitudes, altering mindsets, influencing behavior, and other interpersonal and group skills that OD/IO and change leaders must have cannot be gained without significant practice in safe environments, active discussions, challenging questioning, independent sense-making, observation, and facilitation by a seasoned practitioner.

Differentiators: Content in many certificate programs is consistent. A few of the most critical differentiators are:

- 1. Effective instructional design that incorporates multiple learning modalities and methodologies arranged in sequences designed to aid in understanding and retention.
- 2. The course instructors. Are they facilitators with decades of field experience in a variety of industries and countries, or instructors who consult “on the side?”
- 3. Is the course filled with interesting, new topics that will expand your knowledge, not simply reinforce what you already know?
- 4. Are the experiential learning activities varied, challenging, and thought-provoking?
- 5. Is the content “chunked” into readily accessible and retainable modules?
- 6. Are the modules reinforced with a variety of experiential learning activities that challenge and captivate learners?
- 7. Are there creative opportunities for informal social learning among peers?
- 8. Are the facilitators available to you and willing to devote time to your personal development?
- 9. Are “emergent” OD practices utilized that serve as catalysts to new and original thinking?
- 10. Is the university that offers the program acknowledged for excellence around the world?
- 11. Is it a value, that is, your return on investment worth the time, effort, and cost you will spend?

Conclusion:

There are many certificate programs in OD and Change Leadership. Review them all carefully. Take a look at the Certificate Program in OD and Change Leadership offered by the Peter Drucker Graduate School of Management. Compare it to others. If you’d like to receive a table comparing several certificate programs on this topic or if you have questions about this article or the Drucker program, please contact Alan Landers, President of the OD & Change Leadership Group.

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