One of the guiding values of adult education is that adults do not come to training completely empty handed. Whatever their education level or age, they bring at least some prior knowledge or bias to the classroom. As trainers, we must allow knowledge to be constructed in the minds of our students, by the students themselves. We cannot create knowledge for them; we can only facilitate the process. Understanding this principle will help us to better understand our role as trainers. It will also require us to listen. With every class, and with every new student, we are also learning—if we are listening.

1. **What do they already know?** One of the reasons a trainer should listen to his students is to discover what they already know. We live in a world where knowledge is acquired as informally as it is formally. Even nominal students can easily research topics before entering the classroom. Trainers must recognize this as an opportunity, rather than retreat from it as though it were a threat.

2. **How do they learn?** A far more important reason for listening to your students is to find out how they learn. Most trainers are aware that adults learn in different ways. Few understand that they can detect those variations without a complicated series of questions or games. All they need to do is be attentive to what their students are telling them.

3. **What did they learn?** Not only should you pay attention to what your students already know and discover how to better teach them, but you must listen to find out what they have learned from the training. Surveys and exams are ways we listen to students. However, if they are administered exclusively after the training, our only benefit is to hope we can improve the next class. Just as training has become much more immediate and on-demand, so must our reaction to students. Good trainers are always listening to what their students are learning.
Countering listening challenges
There are, of course, challenges to creating a learning atmosphere that values participation and listening to your students. Flexibility, vulnerability, and likeability are three qualities instructors can develop to effectively counter these challenges.

1. Be flexible. Perhaps the most significant challenge is to change the focus of the training course from what the trainer delivers to what students have learned. On a practical level, this often means being more flexible with the curriculum than most trainers and managers would like. We cannot boldly state that adults learn in different ways and that our classes are made up of different combinations of those learning styles, but at the same time schedule lesson plans down to the precise minute.

Time is not the only area that requires adaptability. Depending on the topic and circumstance, we must be at least somewhat flexible with the curriculum itself. Instructors should be comfortable going beyond the scope of the curriculum if the makeup of the class dictates that possibility. The curriculum, exams, and surveys serve only to ensure that we have met the minimum requirements, not the maximum.

With all of this flexibility, however, comes the potential to get sidetracked. Remember, the teacher is still the guide, and the students don’t know what they don’t know. Whatever you do, don’t use flexibility as an excuse to go on a personal tangent. Most of us have been guilty of diverging from the outline so precisely and predictably that we may as well include our digression in the curriculum. To be flexible without wasting time is to make teaching an art.

2. Be vulnerable. Listening to your students will also require vulnerability. Whether the training is technical or conceptual, one thing doesn’t change—you don’t know everything. And that is okay. Don’t be the instructor who must continually talk to avoid being asked a difficult question.

Being vulnerable is not merely a virtue that some acquire more easily than others. It is certainly not an excuse for ignorance. Saying, “I don’t know, but I’ll find out,” often requires more work than feigning expertise. Trainees know that you have limitations to your knowledge. Whether you like it or not, some students will make it their aspiration to find out where those limits lie. The challenge comes in finding ways to allow students to learn beyond the scope of your knowledge.

3. Be likeable. Instructor likeability is a key factor in how well students learn. This is a classroom, not a battlefield, which means that we must find ways to make teaching an art.
to improve student-teacher interactions. Trainers should work on their relationships with students because it is important to the learning process, not because they are worried about what students think of them. Educators, like leaders, are more concerned with progress than with perception.

**Improving listening skills**
The implementation of these concepts actually begins in very subtle ways. Listening, after all, doesn’t herald its arrival. You can, however, take some practical steps to ensure that you are a better listening teacher.

1. **Start with introductions.** One good place to start listening well is with introductions at the beginning of a class. Consider delaying formal introductions until students have had time to absorb the atmosphere and presence of the others. Encourage students to do more than just announce their names. Use icebreakers that have a purpose of bringing out students’ experience, background, education, and even their hang-ups.

2. **Highlight learner experience.** In a typical class, there will be varying degrees of prior knowledge. It is always helpful to allow students to share their knowledge with other students. Count up the years of experience represented in your class, and compare the total to your own. The students’ total will generally be a larger number than yours; use this information to encourage students to listen to and seek knowledge from each other.

3. **Redirect questions.** When a student asks a question, don’t jump immediately to the response. Ask another student to help you explain a concept. Spread the opportunity equally around the classroom, even to less-experienced students. This will reduce any potential embarrassment and discourage one individual from standing out as an “expert.” It requires much leadership to get some students to talk and others to be quiet, but with practice, this can be very rewarding.

4. **Use break times.** Don’t forget that learning doesn’t take a break. You can often listen and teach as much during a break as during class. Students who might be intimidated to ask a question publicly should feel free to come to you during break time. A student who is concerned that she is the only one not understanding a concept should feel welcome to bring her confusion to your attention privately. When this happens, do your best to weave the sought-after information back into your training session, so that it is reinforced for all students. Privately encourage the timid student to ask the question publicly, or review the material once more. If one person asks the question, it is likely that others need the answer as well.

5. **Incorporate technology.** Use technology to boost learning. In the virtual classroom, use break-out rooms or chat sessions to enable listening opportunities. Create social media groups or wikis in which students can participate. Explain the personal value of contributing to knowledge groups. Enforce the notion that students are also learning when they “teach” a fellow student.

Sometimes the best thing to do is to stop talking and listen. Our students will tell us a lot of things, including how we can better train them. As trainers, we must allow knowledge to be constructed in the minds of our students, by the students themselves.

Daniel W. Bixby is director of marketing and communications for ASTD’s Twin Cities Chapter Board of Directors and leads customer training at the Bosch Communications Division of Bosch Security Systems; danb@astd-tcc.org.