Beginning and ending programme activities in training and development

C.W. Von Bergen
John Massey Professor of Management, South Eastern Oklahoma State University, Durant, Oklahoma, USA

Barlow Soper
Professor, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, Louisiana, USA
Beginning and ending programme activities in training and development

C.W. Von Bergen
John Massey Professor of Management, South Eastern Oklahoma State University, Durant, Oklahoma, USA
Barlow Soper
Professor, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, Louisiana, USA

The introduction posed no problem: I knew I had to gain the confidence and trust of my participants before plunging into course content. I opened with a couple of ice-breakers and an overhead presentation of my learning objectives, and I was on my way to a triumphant middle.

All seemed to go well until I came to the end. When my time was up, I stopped. But I had this gnawing feeling that something was missing. I managed to fit in a summary of course content but still felt uncomfortable as the participants began to disperse.

Bens (1988, p. 19)

Introduction
In religious circles how things end is important. For example, Farrar wrote in his book, Finishing Strong: “It doesn’t matter if you’ve had a great start in the Christian life, or a rough one . . . . What matters most in this all-important race of life is how you finish” (2000, book cover). Likewise, in sporting events it is not vital how things begin but how they end (Brown, 2004). American essayist Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote that: “Great is the art of beginning, but greater the art of ending” (Longfellow, 1993, p. 354) while English writer and playwright William Shakespeare noted the importance of endings when he penned All’s Well That Ends Well (Blooms, 1999). Anecdotally, then, how events end seems to be significant across a variety of domains. Moreover, the importance of endings was found by Redelmeier and Kahneman (1998) in a series of rigorous scientific medical studies employing a colonoscopy, an uncomfortable medical procedure involving a scope on a tube inserted some distance into the rectum and moved about the
bowels searching for abnormalities. The discomfort makes the process seem interminable to most who experience it, though it takes only minutes. In one study 682 patients were randomly assigned to either the usual colonoscopy or to a procedure in which one extra minute was added at the end, but with the colonoscope still. A stationary colonoscope provides a less uncomfortable final minute than what preceded, but it still adds one additional minute of discomfort. The added minute meant that this group got more total pain than the routine group. However, because their experience ended relatively well, their evaluation of the procedure was much more positive and, surprisingly, they expressed more willingness to undergo the procedure again relative to the routine group.

A key learning point for training and development professionals suggested by the earlier observations and Redelmeier and Kahneman’s (1998) research is that they should take particular care with endings, for they affect memory of the entire experience (Seligman, 2002). Thus, it appears how things conclude is important across an array of situations. Yet it is regrettable that human resource development professionals seem to have failed to emphasize the importance of programme endings[1]. Edmunds et al. (2002) noted that training session closings typically garner the least attention of any component of the process. Closing activities are routinely minimized or eliminated in the interest of time or expediency. Instructors often conclude training sessions by looking at their watches and saying: “Oh, time’s up! Goodbye!” This is sometimes called the “3C” approach, i.e. “see the clock, see the schedule, see you later.” Such trainers miss opportunities to reinforce the recently completed training, such as helping participants to consolidate what was learned and maximizing transfer to the workplace. Planned concluding activities can provide closure to instruction, tie up loose ends, summarize highlights, challenge participants, suggest follow-up, and facilitate transitions – all factors leading to more effective learning.

**Purpose of the study**

There are many publications available to help training and development professionals with the teaching and learning process. Given the importance of both beginning and ending training activities, one might expect both to be equally represented in this literature. However, based on the experiences of the authors in both business and academic arenas, it seems that trainers spend more time on, and are more concerned with, opening activities than with ending exercises. Hence, the purpose of the study was to review a sample of training and development texts to determine if there are differences between the
number of beginning and ending techniques described. More specifically, the following two hypotheses were tested:

**H1.** There are significantly more articles addressing training programme opening activities than articles addressing training programme ending activities.

**H2.** There are significantly more pages addressing training programme opening activities than pages addressing training programme ending activities.

**Method**

A total of 76 training and development trade books were examined for inclusion of both introductory and ending techniques (the sample was composed of those citations listed[2]). The research sample was a convenience sample and texts were acquired by seminar instructors and internet research. An online search was conducted at Amazon (www.amazon.com), Barnes and Noble (www.barnesandnoble.com), Pfeiffer (www.pfeiffer.com), the Academy of Human Resource Development (www.ahrd.org/publications/index.html), and the American Society for Training and Development (www.astd.org/index_e.html) with key words “ice breakers,” “training openers,” “training closers,” “opening activities,” “closing activities,” “opening techniques,” “closing techniques,” and other combinations of these words. Additionally, the authors included training materials from Pfeiffer (2004) published as part of its Annuals series. Many human resource development practitioners recognize the series as a valuable collection of practical materials for trainers and learning facilitators that have been published for more than 30 years. A major focus of the series is on experiential learning activities that have been helpful to training and development professionals. Specifically excluded from the search were books and exercises addressing topics of training evaluation and transfer of training. It was felt that such topics, while related somewhat to closing activities, were sufficiently different and independent of seminar or workshop ending actions. Also excluded from this analysis were the more academically orientated training and development texts. These were excluded because such texts do not typically address details like opening and closing techniques (e.g. Gilley and Eggland, 2002; Noe, 2002; Wexley and Latham, 1991).

The content of each source was analyzed, identifying and tallying activities that were categorized as either beginning or ending techniques. For the vast majority of techniques (96 per cent) the intended use was clearly identified by the writers, making clear categorization of openers or closers. In the few instances where there
was some need for researcher judgement, other professional opinions were sought to confirm the judgements. Consensus was reached in all instances.

**Results**

There were 489 opening exercises and 180 closing activities in the sampled texts. The average number of opening activities/exercises was 6.70 (SD = 12.47) and the average number of closing exercises was 2.47 (SD = 7.88). A one-tailed, paired-sample t-test revealed a significant difference ($t(75) = 2.78, p < .005$).

There were 1,277 pages devoted to opening activities and 434 pages that addressed closing exercises. The average number of pages devoted to opening activities/exercises was 17.49 (SD = 34.28) and the average number of pages addressing closing exercises was 5.95 (SD = 18.02). Again, a one-tailed paired-sample t-test revealed a significant difference ($t(75) = 2.76, p < .005$).

**Discussion**

Both research hypotheses were supported, in that there were significantly more openers and pages devoted to openers in the sampled training texts. Indeed, there were many more beginning techniques covered than closing techniques. Our sample revealed that there were 272 per cent more opening activities than closing activities and 294 per cent more pages directed to opening exercises relative to closing ones. This significant imbalance implies that writers of these training materials rely more on the primacy effect than recency effect and by their written presentation suggest, at least tacitly, that others do the same.

One reason for these results may be some difficulty in actually selecting and performing closing activities. Lack of allotted time may be one reason, but another might be that there actually are more ways to begin training experiences than ways of ending them. Another reason for the results might be the faulty assumption that all the important activities have already been completed. In overlooking endings writers may fail to recognize that end of training can be a time to recap and reinforce the highlights of what happened, crystallizing learning, and encouraging participants to take action. Endings of workshops need not only bring a sense of completion but also signal the commencement of a time when participants will begin to apply what was learned. For example, Pike (1989) states that closings allow for affirmation and celebration, action planning, and tying things together.
Closure is also essential to changes (e.g. behaviour or attitude) required in most training programmes. It implies "a sense of harmonious completion," wherein tension with past events is reduced or removed and balance and equilibrium are restored (Albert, 1983). As Jick (1993, p. 197) stated, "disingaging from the past is critical to awakening to a new reality". Certainly Spanish explorer Hernando Cortez understood this when he landed in Mexico in 1519 and proceeded to burn his own ships. Such action marked an ending (we are not going back) and a beginning (onward to victory).

Closure, therefore, involves both a letting go of what no longer works and a continuation of what does. Albert (1983, 1984), for example, proposed that closure activities include summaries, justifications for termination, expressions of positive sentiments, and discussions of continuity in which things are related to a larger context that is not ending. Bridges (1980) proposed that closure conversations focus on, relate to, and support disengagement, disidentification, disenchantment, and disorientation. Despite their apparent differences in focus, what appears to be common to each approach for closure is some form of acknowledgment conveyed in assertions, expressions, and declarations (Ford and Ford, 1995).

Acknowledgment also can involve celebration of the actions and results that foster accomplishment of the change (Richards and Engel, 1986). Celebration is more than rewards: it connotes ceremony, acclaim, and festivity that honours individuals, groups, events and achievements (DeForest, 1986). Things to celebrate are the stages of change, successes, losses and failures, people and events. Conversations for closure acknowledge accomplishments, allowing people to complete their past with respect to the issue of the change and to move on (Albert, 1983; Bridges, 1980).

It is clear that ending procedures are important to training experiences, but this study suggests that they may be underemphasized in practitioner-orientated training texts. However, these results are from a limited sample of training materials, which may be the greatest weakness of the study. Hence, future research might investigate if the discrepancy discovered extends to a broader sample of materials. Also, a temporal analysis might find that the ratio of beginning to closing techniques has changed over time. Furthermore, it might be useful to explore if there are systematic differences between openings and closings for various segments of the training industry. And finally, a comparison of training manual content and actual training experiences might suggest more use of formal endings than the printed material can lead one to expect.
Application

The overemphasis on training programme opening activities as opposed to closing activities reflected in the findings of this study strongly suggests that trainers/facilitators may want to give serious thought to course closings, just as they did at the beginning when the major concern was establishing a proper atmosphere and kicking things off with one or more icebreakers or starters. Moreover, it is felt that learning professionals should take particular care with endings, for they affect the memory of the entire experience. Eitington (2000, p. 62) recommends that trainers “... end things with something of a meaningful bang, rather than with an unsatisfying whimper” and this involves more than simply restating course objectives.

Berns (1988) provides some clues when she said that a good conclusion:

- provides an opportunity for group members to assess their own learning/progress/accomplishments;
- offers trainees reassurance that they have met their goals and thus highlights training achievements;
- stresses that learning is not a one-time accomplishment but rather a continuing process; and
- recognizes each participant as a unique and special person.

Based on these considerations and recommendations we offer a number of suggestions that will create useful and effective closings that we feel will lead to overall programme success. These recommendations are summarized as follows:

1. Be certain to allow enough time for a meaningful ending.
2. Select one or more (or some combination) of the following closing activities:
   - looking back;
   - sharing positive feedback;
   - fabulous prizes;
   - coming home;
   - staying in touch;
   - saying goodbye; and
   - following up.
3. Provide a course-end opportunity for programme and participant evaluation.
4. Provide activities which highlight each person’s individuality.
Beginning and ending programme activities in training and development

(5) Build on action plans.
(6) Plan for some “thank you” time.

More specific and detailed closing activities within this general framework are addressed by numerous practitioner-oriented texts (e.g. Klatt, 1999; Pike and Solem, 1997, 2002):

(1) **Be certain to allow enough time for a meaningful ending.** The first step in providing a successful closure is to build in time for such activities. Instructors must set aside enough time for closing activities and not schedule other content right up to quitting time. The precise amount of time dedicated for this purpose will vary with the length of the programme, its nature (lecture-orientated versus experiential), the personality of the group (warm, friendly, fun-orientated versus cold, distant, withdrawn), and the degree of rapport and intimacy achieved among group members and with the trainer (Eitington, 2002). Lucas (2003) suggests allocating an average of 5-10 per cent of session time for a review and closing activities. For example, in a one-hour programme, give approximately five-10 minutes; in an eight-hour workshop, allow 45-50 minutes for closure. Similarly, Berns (1988) suggests that 3 to 7 per cent of the total workshop time should be allocated for endings and that, if necessary, an exercise or two might be cut from the middle training content to allow for an appropriate ending.

(2) **Select one or more (or some combination) of the following closing activities.** Edmunds *et al.* (2002) have identified a number of broad ending categories that human resource development professionals may wish to incorporate (either wholly or in some combination) in their workshop, seminar, class or course closing activities. These include the following:

- **Looking back.** This is probably the most traditional set of closing activities. These summarize the content and review course expectations. The most common method is a verbal review by the instructor during which expectations, objectives, and processes are summarized. If this method is used, it is critical for the instructor to “revisit” opening participant expectations and session objectives, and clearly identify what was or was not accomplished during the training programme. It is appropriate for the trainer to acknowledge the existence of any “loose ends” or unfinished business. A simple tear-sheet exercise can quickly summarize the workshop. This might involve putting up two tear-sheets with the headings “What’s hot?” and “What’s not?” and then asking participants to think about the overall workshop
(including expectations, objectives, environment, trainer and participants) and respond to the questions verbally. This exercise provides a quick review of the session although it does not look ahead.

- **Sharing positive feedback.** Here participants focus on each other and provide observations and insights. In this format participants are allowed an opportunity to share positive feedback about each other and the instructor. Some ways to accomplish this important task include:
  - **Full plate.** Pass paper plates out to participants along with a strip of masking tape. Ask each participant to take a pencil or pen. Have participants assist each other in attaching the paper plates to each other’s backs. People circulate and write positive affirmations, observations, or feedback about each person on his or her plate.
  - **Brown-bagging it.** Sometime during the workshop, give participants a small paper lunch bag. Have participants personalize their bag. Ask participants to write notes to each other and place them in the bags. Participants cannot read the contents of their bags until they are going home or are at home.

- **Fabulous prizes.** This category involves fun ways to celebrate with the participants. Fabulous prizes are a fun method to energize, reward and celebrate with participants. Throughout the workshop, and especially at closing, inexpensive fun prizes can be given to participants for accomplishments, witty sayings, winning contests, etc. Prizes at the closing of a session can be used to honour exceptional contributions to the training experience.

- **Coming home.** This group of activities entails preparation for re-entry back at the job. When participants have been away from their respective organizations for two or more days, they might need assistance in re-entry, and an instructor may want to spend a few moments talking with participants about how they are going to share what they have learned with colleagues and friends back home. A role-play with one or two participants may prove helpful. A classic article by Marx (1982) provides a detailed approach for overcoming difficulties in applying and using training back home/on the job.

- **Staying in touch.** This type of activity includes mechanisms to help participants stay in contact after the session. When participants leave a training experience, it is often to return to a “business as usual” routine. Staying-in-touch activities
remind them of the training experience and can serve to re-energize and motivate. Some examples include:

- **Name exchange.** The instructor could prepare copies of an information sheet with headings for name, address, e-mail, and phone and fax numbers. Include space for three additional statements: “Remember me as/for ...” (participants write down what they would like to be remembered for); “I need ...” (write down some resource or area that needs resolving); and, “I can give ...” (remind other participants of resources the instructor can provide).

- **Paper airplanes.** The instructor discusses the importance of staying in touch. Trainers might distribute coloured construction paper to participants; ask them to write their name, address, and phone number in the centre of the paper; participants fold paper airplanes under the guidance of a volunteer instructor; when finished, they simultaneously toss the planes in the air. Participants pick up an airplane and are instructed to telephone, e-mail or write to the person named on their plane within 90 days, discussing how they have incorporated ideas/skills learned in the training at their workplace.

- **Saying goodbye.** Exercises in this area include methods to say farewell non-verbally or through closing ceremonies. Even if not in a formal way, it is important that participants have sufficient time to say their goodbyes to the instructor and fellow participants. It may be helpful if, following a training session, the instructor opens the exit doors and stands there as participants leave, shaking their hands and offering words of both thanks and encouragement.

- **Following up.** These activities are designed to provide participants with additional ideas and to reinforce what was learned in the session. Follow-up activities reinforce what was learned in the workshop and renew determination to reach set goals. A sample exercise might involve the trainer having participants address an envelope or postcard to themselves asking them to write about the changes they want to make as a result of what they have learned. Trainees might also include their most important goal. The instructor then has the students put the letter in the envelope and seal it. The instructor collects the letters and mails them to participants 30 days after the programme.
(3) **Provide a course-end opportunity for programme and participant evaluation.** Part of the closure should include exercises that help participants to determine the progress they made in the course, workshop or seminar. Instructors may want to have a “goals” exercise or self-evaluation at the beginning of the programme to which they return at the end for a follow-up. Berns (1988) suggests that trainees be reminded that the end of the training programme marks new beginnings outside the classroom, and that this should only be the first of many learning experiences.

Certainly, mention of Kirkpatrick’s (1996) classic four-level framework for categorizing training outcomes would be appropriate to discuss here. Level 1 (reactions) addresses trainee satisfaction with the programme; level 2 (learning) involves acquisition of knowledge, skills, behaviour and attitudes as measured in the classroom; level 3 (behaviour) deals with improvement of behaviour on the job; and level 4 (results) examines business results achieved by trainees after the programme has been conducted. Both level 1 and level 2 evaluation criteria (reactions and learning) are obtained before trainees return to their job and can be collected at this time. Surveys and questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, tests/examinations, and behavioural demonstrations such as role-plays may be effectively used to evaluate levels 1 and 2 of Kirkpatrick’s four-level framework (Phillips, 1996). Level 3 and 4 criteria (behaviour and results) measure the degree to which trainees are using content on the job and are more appropriately addressed in step 5 of these closing guidelines.

(4) **Provide activities that highlight each person’s individuality.** At the end of a training programme, Berns (1988) suggests that it is time to reassure the participants that, while they were taught as a group, the instructor is concerned with them as individuals. Each participant’s goals entering the training were different and their accomplishments leaving the training are likewise dissimilar. During an ending activity it is recommended that each person focuses on the key aspects of the seminar that were most helpful or relevant to him or her. An appropriate exercise might be to ask participants publicly to indicate what they found to be the most beneficial or, to maintain greater privacy, suggest a journal entry or other private, but concrete expression.

(5) **Build-in action plans.** It is important to use the concluding portion of a training programme to move away from the
hypothesised toward real life or real work situations. Ask participants for either written or spoken statements defining precisely how they will apply their new skills on the job. If appropriate and time allows, meet briefly with each person and ask him or her to commit to an action plan. Develop in the participants a bias for action (Von Bergen et al., 2000) and a motivation to utilize what was learned in the programme on the job.

In this step participants are asked to apply their new skills or knowledge in a task or project and later to document their progress in achieving measurable objectives outlined in an action plan. Trainers may ask trainees to pinpoint specific situations, individuals, dates and places. More formally, this step attempts to address levels 3 and 4 in Kirkpatrick’s framework. As indicated earlier, level 3 and level 4 criteria are used to determine transfer of training and are most usually collected after the actual training session. Phillips (1996) provides other approaches instructors can use to provide information relative to these levels including follow-up assignments, direct on-the-job observation of participants, performance contracts, performance tracking and special follow-up sessions. Surveys of supervisors or workers sometime after the training session has occurred (e.g. 90 days) may also show whether participants are applying new skills or knowledge acquired in the training programme. Regardless of the specific technique/s used, the goal of step 5 is to facilitate the transfer of training beyond the classroom.

(6) Plan for some “thank you” time. Because of the intensive nature of some training, a proper conclusion may allow time for expressions of appreciation (Berns, 1988). Expressing gratitude confirms the positive feelings, puts a lid on the negative ones, and contributes to a sense of completion. It is important that the trainer acknowledges the hard work participants have put into the workshop because this will help them maintain the confidence necessary to transfer their newly found knowledge back to the workplace. Likewise, participants need an opportunity to thank each other for the emotional and psychological exchanges that invariably contribute to successful group development. In intense team-building or management communication training, consider including a concluding exercise in which the instructor actually asks participants to express their gratitude.
Conclusion

It appears that we seem to give more attention to beginnings (e.g., bar mitzvahs, marriages, inaugurals, baby showers, college matriculations, and the ritual laying of the first cornerstone of a new building) than to endings. The data in this paper appear to support this cultural value in the training and development arena. However, we feel that training and development professionals can significantly enhance a training experience if they spend time not only thinking about how a course begins but also by considering how such a development event should end. A number of general considerations were listed in Table 1 that provides instructors and trainers with factors important in programme endings. Detailed activities addressing some of these points are available in several practitioner-orientated training books (e.g., Pike and Solem, 1997, 2002) that highlight the importance of closings.

Notes

1. This observation also appears to be characteristic of academics. An informal survey of professors at the authors’ respective institutions similarly suggested that more time and effort is spent on higher education course beginnings than endings. Professors typically utilize the first class period to make various introductions and discussing the syllabus and course objectives, topics to be discussed, class format (e.g. case study, lecture, experiential), projects to be completed and due dates, grading guidelines, exam formats, class policies and procedures such as attendance and plagiarism, etc. Very little time is devoted to winding up the semester other than the professors typically telling students that they wish there was more time to discuss other important issues but that lack of time prevented them from doing so. This observation is supported by an examination of a classic text (now in its 11th edition) addressing university teaching by well known educator Wilbert McKeachie (McKeachie and Hofer, 2001). The authors devote an entire chapter to starting a class (‘Meeting a Class for the First Time’!) that addresses such topics as breaking the ice, introducing the syllabus and the textbook, and assessing prior knowledge. No discussion of concluding or ending a course is presented in this manuscript first appearing in 1950 (McKeachie and Kimble, 1950).

References


Hazouri, S.P. and McLaughlin, M.S. (1993), Warm Ups and Warm Downs: 101 Activities for Moving and Motivating Groups, Educational Media Corporation, Minneapolis, MN.


McKeachie, W.J. and Kimble, G. (1950), "Teaching tips: a guidebook for the teacher of general psychology", unpublished manuscript (distributed without charge by the Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI).


Beginning and ending programme activities in training and development


Thoughts on Social Endings” (n.d.), available at: www.trinity.edu/~mkearl/endings.html


Points for thought

- Given the importance of both beginning and ending training activities, one might expect both to be equally represented in the literature. However, based on the experiences of the authors in both business and academic arenas, it seems that trainers spend more time on, and are more concerned with, opening activities than with ending exercises.

- Planned concluding activities can provide closure to instruction, tie up loose ends, summarize highlights, challenge participants, suggest follow-up, and facilitate transitions – all factors leading to more effective learning.

- A good conclusion can also cement the idea that learning is not a one-time accomplishment but rather a continuing process.

C.W. Von Bergen is John Massey Professor of Management, South Eastern Oklahoma State University, Durant, Oklahoma, USA.
Barlow Soper is Professor, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, Louisiana, USA.