

# Relevance Revisited Systematically

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**Abstract.** Everyone wants to develop and experience relevance in instruction; some have wanted it badly enough to protest militantly a status quo perceived as irrelevant. This article uses the language and processes of instructional design and development to attempt a definition of relevance and then to apply that definition to what is and isn't being done in instruction. The instructional developer's role in an era of declining enrollments and accountability mandates must expand to screening for and increasing instances of relevant instruction. What is relevance? How does it manifest itself in single courses? In sequences of courses? Why is it important? These questions are addressed through a model that emphasizes time, instructor control, and location for practice opportunities as they relate to course and program objectives.

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## Introduction

Although there have been many pleas for relevance in education, few tangible definitions exist to guide the instructional developer or teacher in developing relevant courses or materials. Shanahan (1979) highlighted the definitional problem yet failed to go beyond the vague suggestion of relevance as education that fosters responsibility in the learner. The very first entry on relevance in the Education Index (Wagner, 1969), published in *Audiovisual*

*Instruction*, parallels the Shanahan emphasis on responsibility in a way congruent with the politics of the late 1960s. Wagner defined a relevant education as one that leads to change in the establishment. Reporting on a speech by Edmund Gordon, Wagner offers a strong political mandate, but no algorithm for effecting relevance through systematic instructional procedures.

Kahn (1971) describes public education in the 1950s as responsible for "carrying out mandates of the establishment" (p. 49). He points to 1965 as the date when harmony between school and society was shattered with widespread agitation for relevant education. The mid- and late 1960s offered a definition of relevant education as a political instrument to change society in the direction of peace and equity. Schools that were relevant would serve "as a model for the ideal of equality in American society" (p. 52). An update on Kahn's 1971 piece is worth composing here.

The 1970s brought us out of Vietnam and into a definition of relevant education that *immediately benefits the individual*—especially the individual's emotional growth as expressed in values growth and self-concept education. The late 1970s continued the emphasis on the individual, but redirected it to the development of the individual's ability to function in society. This has been translated into accountability mandates through minimal proficiency legislation, swelling enrollments in engineering, business and premedical programs, and standing-room-only crowds at workshops on "How to Write a Resume." Relevant education, then, as measured by student choice, may be education that prepares one to get a job and earn money (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 20, 1980, p. 3).

If relevant education involves tangible benefit to the individual or the group and the benefit must be immediate, what about Shakespeare? Thorndike?

Dante? Dewey? How does studying them provide contemporary tools for solving problems? Does education have some irrelevant purposes or can the definition of relevance expand beyond immediacy and tangible benefit? Recent statements provide support for the latter opinion. Ditmer (1979) argues that the purpose of education is to go beyond drills for skills into preparing students to deal with issues and controversy. Thomas (1979) goes so far as to state that "the loss of Homeric and Attic Greek from college life was one of the century's disasters" (p. 73). For these educators and the others who have recently drafted traditional, generalist requirements for graduation from many prestigious universities, the relevant education of 1980 is not only for immediate application of skills to personal or even societal concerns. Relevant instruction also develops learners who will eventually speculate, contemplate, evaluate, tolerate, embrace, and create. The elements of future and intangible benefit are introduced and supported.

While some instructional developers will find themselves embroiled in the ubiquitous debate over relevant *purposes* for education, all instructional developers must be involved in ensuring that the *processes* of instruction exist and are perceived to be relevant. Professionals familiar with a systematic approach to the design of instruction can use their system to define relevant education as education not only relevant in purpose but also relevant in "feeling" as it is experienced by the learners who are engaged in it. It is time to use systemic and systematic interventions to screen and establish strategies for ensuring relevance in instruction. It is a role for which instructional developers are prepared; it is an area of need into which we will be pressed, if we do not go willingly.

## Relevance Systematically

### Who?

Systematic approaches to developing relevance in education begin with questions of who gets educated or trained and how their needs are ascertained. Accusations of irrelevance aimed at local education agencies and institutions of higher education may sound like this: "Your institution is not relevant to our community. What have you done for illegal aliens or Indochinese immigrants or older adults or displaced

homemakers?" or "Sure you have calculus courses, but what about math anxiety?"

A relevant instructional process automatically extends beyond traditional student populations to identify, investigate, and meet the needs of the underserved. Surely this means engaging in a highly political process involving priorities and thorny questions of resource allocation. Yet systematic data gathering involving the opinions and perceptions of many constituencies will ensure the ability to decide whether, for example, to spend money to recruit machinists from all over the country or to look beyond the usual trainees to local women and minorities—potential, though nontraditional, trainees.

Instructional development provides precedent and procedures for expanding learner populations. If women are to learn to operate lathes, then needs assessment and critical incident analysis will have to supplement performance elements gleaned only through task analysis of model performers. All the data sources (Tyler, 1949) should be consulted in an effort to identify the discrepancies between optimal and actual performances unique to the group under study. For example, basic math skills and/or preparation for explaining the demands of night- and swing-shift machine operation to families might be part of this training program. If the instructional developer draws upon such diverse sources as federal mandates and family members in articulating performance demands, those served and the results of that service are much more likely to be judged as relevant. Thus Roger Kaufman's (1978) Alpha Needs Assessment serves the developer who wishes to ensure relevance in populations served and instructional priorities addressed. Tosti and Carleton (in press) label and urge just such a proactive approach to instructional development.

### What?

While education literature reiterates concern about relevant purposes for instruction, educators often fail to convince learners that what they are learning is relevant. Much learner displeasure comes from feeling disenfranchised, as if not enough schooling is "learner activated" (Kapfer, Kapfer, Woodruff, & Stutz, 1970, p. 29). Some dissatisfaction comes from not knowing exactly what instruction is about—why it is

happening, why in this particular way, and why for these purposes.

Instructional developers often get teased for saying what the learner will be able to do, presenting it, asking the learner to do it, and then going on with feedback on how well he or she did it. In fact, these very familiar events within instruction, the statements of purpose and opportunities for practice and feedback in tangible "learner will be able to or learner will choose to . . ." formats contribute to establishing relevance. If educators can be encouraged to present their purposes behaviorally, then they and those affected can discuss (debate) *what the course is about*. This interaction can include questions of applicability to individual goals and societal needs and the immediacy of that application. These questions of relevance can be argued fruitfully only if their presentation transcends glittering generalities. This occurs through the statement of behavioral terminal and enabling objectives presented in some public, visual relationship to each other *and* to the learner and societal needs they are supposed to address. Potent substantiation for this is provided by recalling the way students scrutinize statements like, "When you leave this workshop, you'll be able to . . ." or "Students who have done this module are now able to. . ." Attention is glued to those statements because of their surmised relationship with external, environmental conditions.

### How?

Education deemed relevant is experienced by the learner as meeting needs that regularly appear in life.

Figure 1 illustrates a useful method for increasing the actual and perceived relevance of educational processes. In flow chart format, the educator-controllable and uncontrollable basic elements of instructional sequences are presented within the context of opportunities for relevance.

1. Practice: If the information (generalities, helps, cues, etc.) relating to a particular objective are presented and then followed with in-class practice opportunities (Level I Practices on Figure 1), elicitors of the desired behavior, then students will perceive immediate relevance. This sensation of relevance will be short-lived unless quasi-natural or controlled real world conditions and, eventually, natural practice opportunities also provide

# SINGLE COURSE RELEVANCE

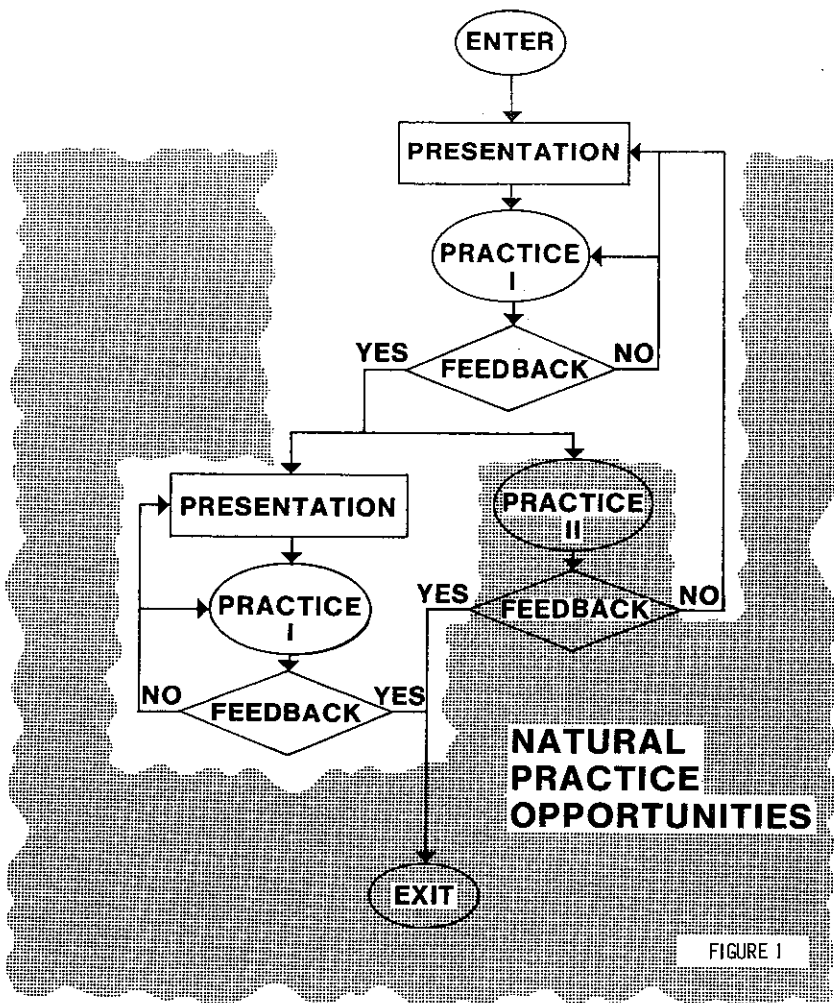


FIGURE 1

elicitors for practicing the content of the instruction. The subject of teacher training in language dominance assessment provides an example. Level I Practices would ask the trainee to administer Oral Language Assessment to a colleague in class with faculty feedback on performance. Level II Practice would bring children to class and present trainees with controlled real world opportunities (or quasi-natural instances) to perform and correct performance. Another Level II Practice might send trainees into classrooms under the supervision of a master performer to practice on one of the master's students.

2. Natural versus Manipulated Conditions: Popham and Baker (1970) provide us with a distinction between natural and manipulated stimulus conditions. This distinction is of use in the quest for relevance. Obviously, the teacher trainees will readily acknowledge the relevance of Oral Language

Assessment competencies when they are asked to carry out such assessments on their jobs, an instance of an even higher order practice opportunity indicated on Figure 1 by the shaded area surrounding the controlled instructional environment. The key factor is in the control of the elicitors for performance. If the instructor or trainer is artificially manipulating conditions (e.g., providing work sheets or embedded test items or practice on film or video models or students with mixed dominance language), students will learn but they will not necessarily perceive relevance. On the other hand, when the demands of the real world present conditions that evoke demonstration of the taught skills (e.g., need for metric skills to figure out a vacation trip or a task at work that involves watching finished sound/slides and generating the objectives and items they would presumably address), relevance in purpose and learner perception of it will coincide.

An example from the field of instructional development will further illustrate the importance of location and control of elicitors for performance in the perception of relevance. The general topics of the history of instructional development and task analysis procedures provide useful, dissimilar topics, one of which is more likely to be perceived as relevant to a student of instructional development. The history of instructional development, on the other hand, because of the difficulty in establishing anything beyond Level I Practices (through test or classroom discussion), would be perceived as less relevant. Faculty controlled and on-the-job requirements would ensure demands for task analysis skills; this is probably not true of the knowledge attached to the history of the field. (Relevance, although the subject of this piece, is, of course, not the only criterion for inclusion in a curriculum.)

## When?

What of the very young learner or the student not yet working at a job related to his or her education or training—the student collecting fees at the racquetball court or driving a glass-bottom boat? This student will not have the opportunity for natural practice during only one course. The shaded area in Figure 1 will not relate to classroom instruction. This student must trust in sequences of courses to perceive and experience relevance (see Figure 2).

All the more dependent on the quality of manipulated (classroom exercises) and quasi-natural practices (e.g., field work or internships), such a student can benefit from what Kapfer et al. (1970) termed "carrier projects." These are opportunities for learners to encounter "some of the objects and processes that constitute his environment." Though not necessarily based on new content, these practice projects ask the student to try out skills and ideas on real world concerns. A "relevant" example is the pressing mandate to teachers of social studies and the history of Western civilization, provided by the crises in Iran and Afghanistan. The technology of 1980, which trumpets international and national challenges, can also play a role in increasing the likelihood that manipulated classroom stimulus conditions will link with and resemble real world circumstances. Audio and videotape can capture diverse opinions and challenges; microprocessors can present

simulation opportunities. Manipulated and quasi-natural experiences can diminish the students' discomfort at having to wait to use what they've been taught.

Time is a central element in the judgment of relevance. When will use(s) for the learned material present themselves? Will the demands for use continue? Why is there a gap between what is being learned and the natural elicitors that surround one at home and at work? Were the learners asked when they had last applied skills and information presented in class (Svboda, 1974)?

Most learning situations promise deferred application, relevance that will come later in situations the learners are preparing to face. Of course, this is the litany of the elementary and, often, the secondary schools. This could be translated into, "While you don't need to know the major products of the regions of the U.S.A. while living at home with your parents or for writing criterion-referenced items in your job collecting fees at the racquetball court, I promise you that you will need to know that later." Promises of future relevance work splendidly for educators who do at least some of the following:

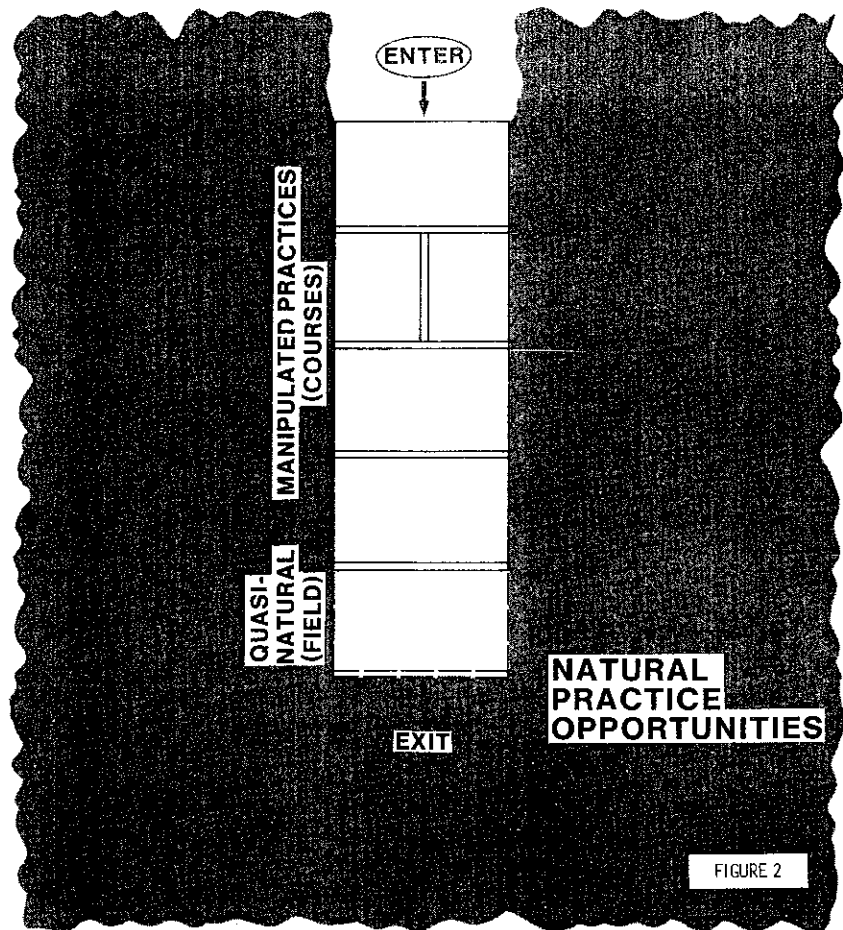
1. Select some of the course objectives on the basis of how immediately those skills will be demanded in the student's real world. If there is no way to be assured of natural stimulus conditions for *any* objectives relating to your course (e.g., Shakespearean literature), then build quasi-natural opportunities (e.g., play attendance and scene performances) into the syllabus.

2. If learners are promised that this or that skill will be demanded in the near future, make sure it happens. The educator who promises and then is proven honest in those promises can do it again. The student may return and say, for example, "You forced us to practice explaining test scores to parents and I admit I thought it was silly, but then Mr. and Mrs. Q burst into my classroom. Ms. Stone had gone home early; I was substituting and they demanded immediate explanation of these test scores. I had to do it—I even did it well."

3. Encourage current and former students to bear witness in public of eventual applicability. Educator promises are bolstered by the words of learners with whom students can identify.

4. Screen each objective for its applications over time. An example is in-

## RELEVANCE IN SEQUENCES OF COURSES



struction for students in administering a particular test; while that test may be relevant to P.L. 94-142 in 1980, it will no doubt be altered or abolished as sharper assessment devices appear. That is, current relevance does not ensure future relevance. Include generic skills (e.g., general test result explanation or test direction giving) to ensure future applicability in addition to immediacy.

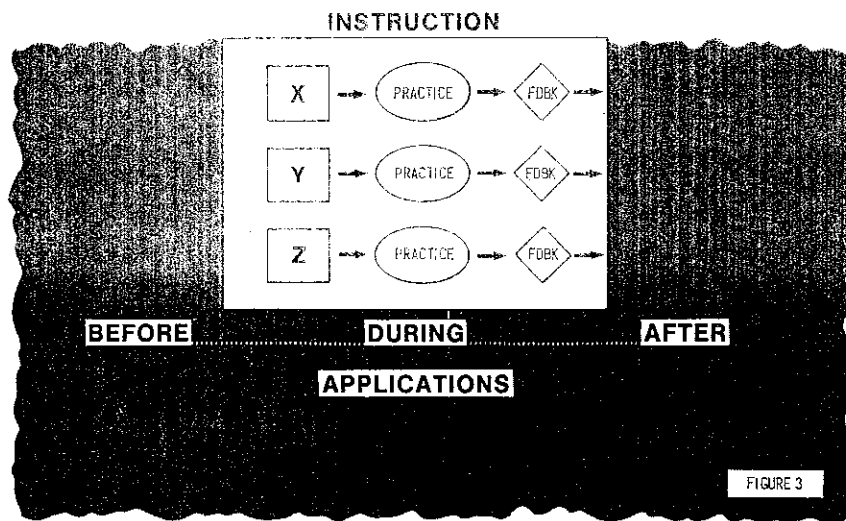
5. Familiarize students with the idea of relevance in time. Figure 3 can be used to share your concern that the purposes and the processes of instruction are relevant to them.

The letters X, Y, and Z represent varying potential course contents (take, for example, X for media selection skills, Y for knowledge of the differences between objectives written in Gagné or Mager formats, and Z for the ability to explain what an instructional developer does in response to queries by skeptical subject-matter experts.) These examples enable us to perceive relevance in time

as we examine the likelihood of natural opportunities for practice existing in the shaded area outside the course environment (i.e., the real world). Has the student been confronted with questions like, "Which medium would be best for this map reading unit or what objectives within this traffic controller training program should include visual display with the computerized voice synthesizer?" or "What's the difference between the way my objectives look and the way yours look?" or "How can you possibly develop training programs for turbine engines when you never saw one until last month?"

Manipulated and quasi-natural elicitors can be provided within the boundaries of the course experience, but, especially in a professional preparatory or skills training program, they will not substitute interminably for elicitors that came before or during the course. Faith in future opportunities for application will directly and positively re-

## RELEVANCE IN TIME



late to evidence and quantity of previously and currently usable material in the course.

### Why?

Legislatures mandate it. The judiciary rules in behalf of it. Students select in favor of it. P.L. 94-142, Title IX, the Lau Decision and full time equivalent (FTE) trends—all are manifestations of the constant, public press for relevance in education. This press involves identifying problems and challenges external to the school and the expectation that the school will prepare students to act upon these problems. Thus education should smudge the boundaries between the school and the world, enabling students to move between educator-controlled and natural environments, practicing their new skills and ideas.

Relevant education links the centers of learning with individual, community, and societal needs. This paper has linked instructional development with analysis of and strategies to achieve relevance.

*Through development.* Demographically, the dwindling pool of traditional learners now forces teachers, principals, deans, and professors to become even more sensitive to the desires of students. Certainly relevance in instruction is one such desire. Jerome Bruner said, "Let knowledge as it appears in our schooling be put into the context of action and commitment" (1973, p. 115). Working with individual teachers, professors, and trainers,

instructional developers can systematically design responsive and therefore relevant instructional experiences and sequences. This will improve instruction through provision of manipulated, quasi-natural, and natural practice opportunities. More effective instruction and sharpened purposes and processes will affect enrollments and, ideally, ensure demand for instructional development activities.

*Through assessment.* Taxpayers have been sending clear messages to educational institutions about their dissatisfaction with today's education. The absence of relevance is one cause for this dissatisfaction. Instructional developers, using the model presented here, can work with institutions to increase their relevance and with the public to weigh the value of immediate and deferred applications. Constituencies inside and outside educational institutions can turn to instructional developers to assist in varying definitions of relevance for different kinds of centers of learning. This definition offers another perspective for an ongoing discussion of the different purposes and processes of, for example, universities, community colleges, and adult skills training centers.

*Through understanding.* Lofty promises or pleas for relevance can be replaced by the language and processes of instructional development. While few would argue the desirability of a rele-

vant education, in the past still fewer have been able to define or address it. That has been started—in words, processes, and visual representations potentially translatable into homework assignments, syllabuses, and school and university projects.

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