As the senior care industry struggles to curb rampant employee turnover and deal with regulators, competitors, and the economy, many companies have embraced new, often technologically advanced approaches to operations.

Training is an area of operations whose widespread impact is just beginning to be realized, at least in the senior care industry. As its importance grows, it too becomes the target of efforts to update, upgrade, or otherwise improve existing processes and methods.

Although technophiles and born-again trainers are quick to adopt the latest fads in training, this can lead to a misguided rush to dump the bathwater, baby and all. Traditional methods do have serious shortcomings that can be addressed by newer approaches, but they also have features that cannot yet be mimicked by technology and they can still be a vital part of a thoughtfully integrated training program. That will be the overriding theme of this 3-part article as it explores both traditional and new approaches to training frontline caregivers.

First, the bad news...

In their report “Blended Learning for Compliance Success”, authors Kapp and McKeague point to a number of disadvantages of classroom style learning, including the following:

- **Poor Use of Classroom Training Time**
  Pouring coffee, finding seats, organizing papers, looking for a missing pen under the table, signing the inservice attendance form, all take time that has been allotted to training. And this doesn’t take into account the preparation necessary to conduct a training session, from learning new information to scheduling the room and equipment, tracking down the manuals or videos, and reviewing notes.

- **Disrupted Training Plans**
  Coordinating several individual schedules in a 24/7 environment where “emergencies” are the norm, is also problematic and often delays the start of the learning process. A walk-in tour or a dying resident can take priority – as it should – over the inservice scheduled for the day. Such delays or discrepancies can lead to regulatory deficiencies,
but also incur hidden costs such as those related to worker satisfaction, quality of care, and workplace injuries.

- **Different strokes for different folks**
  A bigger problem arises out of diversity, not only in language or ethnicity, but in learning styles, intelligence, current level of knowledge, interest levels, peak alertness times, shifts, and job roles. In a classroom setting where everything must be told to everyone at the same time, it’s hard to accommodate diversity. Instructors may try to do an end run around this problem by aiming at either the highest or lowest common denominator. Among other serious results, this can lead to an insidious effect, reported by some training leaders, in the diffusion of boredom from those who “know it all” to those who would like to. This transference isn’t limited to pupils; instructors can also radiate their displeasure with teaching the same remedial subject to the same disinterested crowd over and over again.

- **Consistency in Training**
  Ironically, while consistent instruction within a diversified classroom can be detrimental, consistency across a teaching program is a key component of success. Consistency allows for apples-to-apples measurements of learning across employees and across time. Unfortunately, human instructors can be the source of unwanted variance. Important information may be rushed, truncated, or skipped altogether due to personal or professional emergencies; instructors may focus on star pupils and talk “over the heads” of other attendees; on any particular day an instructor may be brusque, friendly, talkative, reserved, expressive, loud and clear, hoarse and quiet. Variance can also arise out of the preference for, or availability of, particular content delivery formats (e.g., chalkboard v.s. videos).

- **Measuring the Results**
  A final problem with classroom learning is measurability. Counting the number of blank stares aimed at a projection screen is a popular, albeit not very useful, method of measuring the success of a class. A post-test is better, but many times these are pass/fail or ridiculously simple. Once collected, such tests may be filed away in the deepest recesses of storage, left for surveyors or future archeologists find.

**Finding a Solution**

A 2002 report by the Office of the Inspector General that included responses from over 1,000 nurse’s aides, administrators and trainers echoed many of the problems noted above. But if classroom instruction is left wanting in so many ways, why is it still in such widespread use? One possible answer is that compliance is the driver, not learning. Whether employees absorb the material presented is less important than their name on the sign-in sheet. This compliance mentality misses many of the key benefits of effective learning, however (the detailing of which will come in a future article).
A more optimistic hypothesis can be explained by the parable of the grizzly bear and marmot. Grizzly bears are known to hunt marmots for food, even though the effort required to overturn the boulders the marmots call home is greater than the caloric energy returned by these tiny rodents. Scientists believe that there must be some benefit gained through the effort to capture marmots that exceeds their food value (and apparently science’s ability to figure it out). So what is the added benefit of classroom instruction that is above and beyond the mere content disgorged?

Most of the key benefits of classroom instruction revolve around its potential for discussion. If allowed to move beyond the didactic, live instruction provides the opportunity to clarify difficult concepts and answer individual questions. In such an environment, dialogue can occur in which concepts, ideas, and information can be exchanged. Another benefit of live instruction is that it allows for the use of credible company and industry experts, who can pass on knowledge gained from years of experience and reflection. Last, but certainly not least, is that live instruction holds the potential to teach problem solving more effectively than other methods of instruction.

Unfortunately, the potential of instructor-led training is seldom realized. The good news is that the wise application of new approaches to training can actually augment the more traditional methods, giving instructors time to impart knowledge rather than just presenting rudimentary information. Part two of this article looks at the promise and the reality of new learning technologies and the part they can play in a blended learning environment. Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater quite yet!