User-Friendly Language and Training

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User-friendly means "easy to learn, use, understand, or deal with (user–friendly software); agreeable, appealing (a user–friendly atmosphere)" ~ Merriam-Webster

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever thought about "user-friendly language" as it applies to training? Often trainers use descriptive words or phrases out of habit or because of tradition in their agency. "User-friendly language" denotes a more intentional use of words and phrases to convey a positive tone, connect with potential participants, and invite general involvement in the learning process. In addition to paying attention to body language (another topic altogether), trainers may want to consider the messages conveyed by the words they use in planning and conducting training events.

Few would argue that trainers set the stage for what happens, both indirectly and directly, during the training session. Experienced trainers often deliberately use language that promotes relationship-building – between trainer and participant as well as *among* participants – and enhances the effects of the learning experience for everyone involved. These deliberate yet simple tactics can have a substantial and positive impact on participants' involvement in the learning experience and can even affect their subsequent use of the information in daily practice.

Let's examine basic user-friendly language you could try out immediately to judge the impact for yourself. While you might be skeptical that user-friendly language matters in practice, considering your personal experience as a recipient of less than user-friendly language may solidify its importance in your mind. In the process, you may discover a few simple tools that quickly enhance your capacity to influence early childhood practice in positive ways.

"PDS" INSTEAD OF "TRAINER"

The idea of replacing the title of "trainer" has been kicking around in the early childhood field for some time. It is often said by proponents that "we train dogs and horses, not people." One definition of the verb "train" is *to develop or form the habits, thoughts, or behavior of (a child or other person) by discipline and instruction*. That definition does not imply a learning partnership as well as the early childhood field might like.

The issue was finally resolved for many professionals when the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and other early childhood professional groups introduced the title of "professional development specialist."   In doing this, they recognized that there are various roles within the scope of the title such as trainer, mentor, consultant, coach, technical assistance provider, etc. Does that shift in language change your feelings about your professional role? Does thinking about yourself as a "professional development specialist" make a difference to you?

"PARTICIPANTS" INSTEAD OF SOMETHING ELSE

At a deep, albeit subtle level, the way trainers describe the people who come to training events can reflect learning expectations for those same people. Are these people attendees? Are they registrants? Are they students? Are they categorized by their

working roles – teachers, providers, caregivers, directors, etc.? In almost all cases, they are expected to be "participants" in the activities planned and offered by the trainer. So why not just call them that.

Can how trainers label the people who attend their training make a difference to the trainers themselves? Yes, it can! When trainers think and talk about attendees at training events as "participants," they are more likely to begin planning how the presentation can be structured to elicit meaningful "participation." As trainers plan the session or sessions, the important aspect of active "participation" is suddenly thrust to the forefront.

Can a label matter to the people registered for the training? Experience shows it can. Using the label of "participants" conveys an expectation of "participation" to those who sign up for the training session.

The answer to the question "did you *participate* in that session . . . ." is likely to be very different from the answer to the question, "did you *go to* that session . . . ."! Participation may look different for each participant, but the critical thinking most likely to result from active participation is necessary for change in practice to occur.

So what else can happen when the term "participants" is used? Besides the potential of altering the format of the session to include relevant and meaningful participatory activities, the word conveys an expectation of willingness – to both instructor and student – to become genuinely involved in learning.

The word "participants" evokes a picture of a group of individuals who are primed to listen to the research, eager to gather information, ready to learn or develop skills, and prepared physically and mentally to contribute. "Participants" listen to the research because they want to implement evidence-based practice and grapple with research-to-practice themes, etc. "Participants" are eager to gather information and develop skills whenever the opportunity presents itself. And "participants" are prepared to contribute because they envision themselves as active in their own learning. While these assumptions may not always result from the use of one little word, they can be the natural outcome.

"LEARNING" INSTEAD OF "TRAINING"

Going back to the definition of trainer, there is good reason to replace the loaded word "training" with the more descriptive word "learning." Instead of "training" goals, outcomes, and activities, try restating those phrases as "learning" goals, outcomes, and activities. This simple replacement of words can have a profound effect on planning a training session and a positive influence on attitudes about the prospect for participating in training.

It can be compared to the difference in approach between adult-centered and child-centered practice in an early childhood setting. When the focus is on learning, the participant is more likely to have his or her specific needs met. There is quite a difference between saying "I am *participating* in a learning event. . . ." and "I am *going to* a training event . . . ."

Most significantly, the emphasis on "learning" explicitly places the responsibility for the act of learning directly on the *learner*, whereas emphasis on "training" seems to everyone involved to place the responsibility for learning on the *trainer*. When trainers talk about and plan for active learning, their full attention can be on providing satisfactory information, applicable hands-on activities, and appropriate feedback and support for participants. The session is more likely to be set up to give people opportunities to participate in personal growth and learning with respect for their individual levels of readiness.

The trainer's role as "learning facilitator" becomes to encourage participants to ask themselves, "How can I use this opportunity to learn in a way that works best for me?" instead of "What does the trainer want from me?" In particular, when trainers see themselves as "learning facilitators," by definition, they are more likely to employ techniques that promote participants' self-direction and build self-confidence throughout the learning process.

This type of training session satisfactorily meets the learning requirements of adult learners. At the same time, it produces the amazing outcome of modeling appropriate practice with young children in important and obvious ways. Do children *attend* child care or *participate* in child care?

"WE" INSTEAD OF "YOU"

Trainers can both bond and build connections with participants by using the "we message" combined with third person references such as "all of us" and "our programs" in place of "you" and "your programs." Trainers commonly use phrases such as "*you* need to understand" and "it is important for *you* to know." Using "you" however it is used can appear condescending and controlling. Instead of saying "*you* need to wash hands after each diaper change," try "*we* need to wash our hands after each diaper change."

Once it is pointed out, it becomes obvious that "you" is the primary language of preaching and often scolding. Further, it denotes the hierarchy of expert and non-expert. The idea that we are all in the early childhood profession and learning together increases cooperation and invites participation in the learning process. Of course, "we" should not be used in circumstances when it is obviously inappropriate, such as when referring to a specific program or an individual's unique experience. Avoid anything like the example of the nurse who says "how are we feeling today?"

You may be thinking that you are not a teacher or have never worked in a family child care home, so you can't say "we" this and "we" that when those people are in the group. If you look above at NAEYC's definition of professional development specialist, you will note that the one title indicates multiple roles. The same is true for Montana's definition of early childhood practitioner.

According to the Early Childhood Project, "early childhood practitioner includes caregivers, teachers, educators, administrators, and other advocates for young children. . . . . who work with children birth to age eight (providing direct or indirect service) in a variety of settings:

- Family and group child care homes
- Child care centers
- Head Start and Early Head Start programs
- Preschools
- Public/private schools – preschool-3rd grade
- Higher education, including community and tribal colleges and universities
- Child care resource and referral agencies
- Community agencies serving children/families

- Private organizations and government agencies who impact early care and education at local, state, and regional levels"

Now that any resistance to using "we" language has been addressed, let's look at the concept of trainers and participants becoming "partners in learning." Most educators would generally agree with the chart below comparing the roles of the trainer and the participant in an optimal learning partnership.

Trainer's Role	Participant's Role
To share knowledge and experience	To share knowledge and experience
To provide active learning opportunities	To take advantage of learning opportunities
To give appropriate feedback (many trainers are not doing this but it is still part of the instructor's role)	To give appropriate feedback about the success of the activities to the instructor
To create a safe climate and offer encouragement	To encourage others in the learning process

The natural conclusion is that trainers and participants in training are collectively helping one another become the best early childhood practitioners they can become, independent of their various roles!

> "Learning Facilitator's Role: To nurture each participant's ability to learn from his or her own experience."

MORE USER–FRIENDLY LANGUAGE

In view of the diversity of prospective participants and the emphasis on self-directed learning instead of teacher-directed training, it seems important to also consider the language used to talk about the workshops, courses, and associated materials used in training. Keeping in step with national attention to professional development in the early childhood field, training is frequently offered for academic credit from a college or university. However, as the nation moves in this direction, it must be kept in mind that

academic language may sound intimidating to some individuals in early childhood programs.

With respect for this concern, the first step in developing a training opportunity is to make the language describing the training user-friendly. Friendly language allows the event to be accessible to as many early childhood professionals as possible, including the novice provider. Even though this language softens the academic emphasis, it maintains the focus on learning rather than on training or educating.

The following chart illustrates the deliberate choice of professional, but not academic (or jargon), terms to describe the various professional elements of training or course work.

Academic language	User-friendly language
Class or course	Class or learning session
Syllabus	Course or learning guide
Student	Participant
Teacher, Instructor or Trainer	Professional Development Specialist
Training goals, modules, or activities	Learning goals, modules, or activities

"PLAY" INSTEAD OF "WORK"

It is often said that children's "play" is their "work" meaning that playing promotes children's optimal growth and development. Young children seldom have an emotional response to either word. Adults, however, likely have unspoken and visceral responses to both words. Adults may unknowingly resist activities labeled "work" in favor of those labeled "play."

Do you have the same reaction to someone saying "let's *play around with* these concepts" as you do when someone says "let's *work* on these concepts"? The

word "play" brings to mind an image of fun, manipulation of objects or ideas, movement, and maybe even laughter. The word "work" brings to mind a less attractive image.

Trainers can use this knowledge to everyone's benefit. Providers and teachers have often been <u>working</u> since early morning and are now sitting in a training session. <u>Playing</u> with materials and ideas during the session can result in adults' "optimal growth and development" in whatever topic is being taught.

As you think about training events, it might be helpful to envision everyone *playing* together with concepts and ideas related to the outcomes you are trying to achieve. The learning activities may or may not look different from what you typically offer, but everyone's approach to participation – including yours – may become more productive and enthusiastic. Who doesn't feel interested and curious at some level when an instructor says "let's do an experiment"? Using a relevant cartoon or humorous story to introduce the topic or singing a nursery song to reinforce a concept (you can make up your own words to make it applicable), enriches the learning environment.

CONCLUSION

The concept of adopting "user-friendly" language may seem novel and even an unnecessary detail to some people. And yet, trainers are often first to notice the difference language can make when they themselves participate in professional development and observe their fellow instructors in action.

It all comes down to the question of what trainers can do to be most effective. User-friendly language is relatively easy to use compared to the extent of its impact. Your challenge is to try it out and see the difference it makes. ~

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