
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

An e-newsletter supporting effective adult learning practices

December 2007

MONTANA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

Issue #17

THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE TRAINING SESSION

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The essence of being an effective workshop leader is knowing how to take the content you have and present it in such a way that you reinforce learning connections—connections that transform participants ways of thinking about who they are and what they do. ~ Paula Jorde Bloom

INTRODUCTION

The importance of actively involving participants during training has been firmly established. As an essential component of learning, active involvement addresses the needs of adult learners and promotes change in knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Trainers can encourage active involvement in many ways and on many levels. These include embedding time for: reflection, questions, discussion, peer teaching, participation in games, simulation activities, and action plans for implementing new ideas after the session.

Making the most of active learning opportunities requires thoughtful preparation, focused presentation, and meaningful evaluation. Active learning cannot be achieved with activities that are time-fillers or designed "just for fun!" Trainer time and participant time are too valuable for mindless or meaningless frills. While some activities may indeed be worthy or enjoyable in and of themselves, it is important to continuously ask yourself two questions during the planning process of your training:

~ Will this activity be meaningful to participants? Meaningful activities help participants: a) become comfortable in the learning environment, b) get to know the trainer and fellow participants, c) make sense of important concepts, d) reflect on personal attitudes and beliefs, or e) practice a new skill. You are most effective when you plan activities that are meaningful

in one or more of these ways.

~ Will this activity be purposeful for participants? Purposeful activities help participants: a) acquire skills they can use in their programs, b) develop relationships with colleagues for future networking and support, or c) gain new information useful in development of policies, practices, and everyday work with young children. The impact of your training rises in proportion to your ability to plan activities with respect to the strengths, interests, and needs of the people actually participating in the training

Once a trainer is committed to using active learning in training sessions, designing effective training can be broken into three stages—preparation, presentation, and evaluation. Let's look at these stages one by one.

PREPARATION

Any workshop you give regardless of how short, deserves thoughtful planning. A haphazard approach to training not only wastes the time of participants, it hurts your reputation. ~ Paula Jorde Bloom

What you do before a training session makes a big difference in its impact. During the preparation stage, you will want to think about a number of different aspects of the topic, consider the best methods to use

to achieve positive outcomes, and plan carefully. Ideas and methods used by many trainers are described below.

~ Review the goals and objectives for the training session. How can activities help support participants' need to develop and enhance their knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes? Brainstorm activities that will support the primary learning outcomes of the session.

~ Select appropriate group sizes for planned activities. To select appropriate group sizes, you will need to consider the training goals, the total number of participants, the amount of time allotted for the activity, and the size and arrangement of the training space. You can plan for participant involvement as a whole group, in small groups of 4 - 6 people, in pairs, or on an individual basis.

Each configuration has advantages for effectively encouraging participant involvement, and you may have your favorite(s). However, it is important to provide a balance of different configurations within each training session and especially across a series of sessions. Not only will variety help you to better meet your training goals but variety is more likely to address a range of participant learning preferences.

~ Decide how to group participants for activities. Sometimes it is reasonable to allow participants to choose their seating and let work groups develop naturally. At other times, it is advantageous to make assignments. Assign individuals to specific groups when you want to mix experienced and less experienced participants, encourage interaction with new colleagues, or separate particularly gregarious pairs. Group assignment can be routine or creative—using stickers on name tags, counting off, or selecting assorted types of candy from pre-sorted dishes.

~ Design each activity with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Beginning: Decide how to introduce the activity so participants understand and value the process. Make sure participants have the information they need to complete the activity correctly. Give clear instructions to promote self-direction and timely completion. Have printed instructions on each table or on an overhead so participants can refer to the steps of the activity following your introduction.

Middle: If you have introduced a new concept it is important to provide review sheets containing key information so participants can check and double-check their understanding of the information throughout the activity. Provide a time frame for each activity, and let participants know when time is nearing the half-way point.

End: Clearly plan and communicate the "end result" of the activity. Planning adequate closure for an activity is a critical step in facilitating small group activities. When the activity is primarily an opportunity to explore participant values and feelings, completion of the small group activity itself may provide adequate closure with no further discussion. When you desire a more formal ending, individual participants or small groups could be invited to share their discoveries or thoughts with the larger group in some active way. In any case, participants need to be given a way to use the results of their work together.

Examples of closure activities include individual reflection and/or development of an action plan or exchange of ideas from each group following the activity. This exchange can take many forms including the use of post-it notes to create a sharing board, verbal or written reports of the most important idea explored by each group, touring each group to see and hear about each group's product, or peer teaching activity with members of each group working together to explain their unique topic.

~ Be prepared to modify your plans. Preplan some contingencies. Decide what you will do when time runs short, when participant numbers are higher than expected, or when the group appears uninterested and uninvolved in the activity.

PRESENTATION

A well-designed workshop will give you the confidence you need on the day of your presentation to focus on the needs of your participants. ~ Paula Jorde Bloom

Adequate preparation pays off. During the presentation stage, you will be able to focus on being attentive to the learner and the learning process in meaningful

and profound ways. Following are ways to deepen the impact of your presentation.

~ Once participants have arrived, create a safe and comfortable learning environment. Activities work best when participants feel comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences. Comfort is established when ground rules are set and the trainer models a sense of acceptance and shared learning goals.

~ Help participants make the shift from passive, lecture-based learning to an active model of learning. Clearly review the goals of each activity so participants understand the purpose and rationale for the activity. Provide written instructions that participants can refer to throughout the task that clearly describe what to do first, second, and third. Promote the skills necessary for collaborative learning by giving participants clear roles for small group work (recorder, reporter, timekeeper, cheerleader, etc.). Participants may need help developing collaborative skills when their previous training experiences have followed traditional teaching styles.

~ Take a dynamic role during small group activities. Let participants know you are available to clarify the task or answer questions. Carefully observe the progress of each group to determine the need to extend or reduce the time to allow for completion. Periodically ask each group to check in with its members to gauge their progress toward completion. This is especially important when you notify groups of the half-way mark in the time allotted for the activity. Checking in allows participants to make decisions, assess their own progress, and adjust their discussion accordingly.

An active role sometimes means that you stand back and allow the groups to come to you when they need assistance. Sometimes you may decide to visit groups on a rotating basis to check for accuracy in their process and assess their progress. When you do this, it is important to respect group autonomy by asking whether this is a good time to join the group.

~ Bring closure to the session. Your method of bringing closure to the session is determined by the goals of the training. At the very least, summarize what has been learned and the active learning processes used to get there.

When the session is designed to help participants explore learning content or put new ideas to practice,

you may desire more formal closure. The closing activity in this case should allow you and participants to check for accuracy of the individual interpretations and provide information about future training and implementation needs.

EVALUATION

Part of the joy of training is the close connection between the teaching process and the learning process. While you are a teacher helping participants in your training learn, participants are "teachers" helping you learn how to teach even better. Feedback from participants is critical to this process.

~ Give participants ample opportunity to express their assessment of various aspects of the learning process. Use probing questions to assess their satisfaction, their comfort level, and perceived benefits to their learning. Evaluation can be verbal or written, depending. To get at participant satisfaction ask questions such as: "Did you have the opportunity to speak and listen? What were the strengths of your group in completing this activity? What were the difficulties you or your group encountered?"

To assess comfort level, ask questions such as: "Would you like to participate in this type of activity again? Why or why not? What would you change about this activity?"

To measure perceived learning benefits, use open-ended statements such as "The most important thing I learned from this activity was"

~ Use the feedback you receive. Each time you try a new idea, you have the opportunity to learn from the experience, "tweak" your idea after you get feedback, and try again!

The feedback participants have given me has been an invaluable source of personal enrichment as I've worked to perfect my own presentation skills.
~ Paula Jorde Bloom

CONCLUSION

Experienced and inexperienced trainers alike have their favorite methods for training. It is not uncommon

mon to take shortcuts or pass over processes that are less familiar or uncomfortable. It is beneficial, from time to time, to reexamine the basic elements of training to ensure you continue to use best practice. ~

RESOURCES*

*Workshop Essentials: Planning and Presenting Dynamic Workshops by Paula Jorde Bloom (2002). Lake Forest,

IL: New Horizons. This book will help you ignite a passion for learning and engage your participants as active partners in the learning process. It provides the tools you need to design and deliver high content, high involvement, and high-energy training.

* Training Solutions #1 - 16. These e-newsletters describe in more detail individual aspects of effective training. Available at www.montana.edu/ecp.

TRAINING SOLUTIONS was established by the Early Childhood Project at Montana State University with monies from the federal Child Care and Development Fund administered through the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services Early Childhood Services Bureau. It is designed to support positive and effective training strategies for use in early childhood professional development.

TRAINING SOLUTIONS is published four-six times a year. Individuals on the Montana Early Childhood Trainer Directory receive the e-newsletter as a benefit through the ECP Trainer Listserv. If you are not currently subscribed to the listserv, or are unsure if you are or not, please check your status by e-mailing ecp@montana.edu. **TRAINING SOLUTIONS** is also available at www.montana.edu/ecp. Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

If you have stories to share about implementing the ideas described in this issue, please address your comments to your training colleagues at trainerdirectoryexchange@listserv.montana.edu. If you have comments about the topic of this newsletter or ideas for topics to address in future issues, please contact:

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