SETTING GROUND RULES FOR TRAINING SESSIONS

Written by Susan Harper-Whalen and Sandra Morris

The path to good teaching can be much easier to navigate when we view students as our traveling companions.

~ Elizabeth Normandy

INTRODUCTION

Whenever individuals meet together, it is helpful to develop guidelines for positive participation. Meaningful guidelines, often called "ground rules," provide a framework to ensure "open, respectful dialogue, and maximum participation" (EdChange, 2007). Using ground rules to build a safe learning climate is especially important in the field of education where many teaching practices are strongly linked to personal values and experiences. A completely safe learning environment can provide a cushion for the shifts in thinking and practice that new knowledge and skills may require.

One component of a trainer's preparation for a training session likely includes ideas or even a list of suggestions for maintaining a safe and productive learning climate. To implement ground rules effectively, these initial ideas should be used as a springboard for a collaborative process. Ground rules are best shaped by group discussion and consensus resulting in a mutually agreed-upon list of guidelines unique to each community of learners. While this list of shared expectations provides a powerful guide for shaping the teaching/learning experience, the process of collaboration to create these rules is just as powerful. When learners are given a voice and engaged as active participants from the onset, their ownership of the learning process throughout the training session is inaugurated and promoted.

The scope and process of establishing ground rules varies according to the particular situation. For example, ground rules for a daylong orientation for new providers may be somewhat different from ground rules for a two-hour session with seasoned child care directors. The length of the session, level of participant expertise, and content of the presentation all influence the goals and processes for establishing ground rules as well as the ground rules themselves. While the focus of this discussion is training, ground rules can support your work in many settings, such as advisory board meetings, child study team meetings, and staff retreats.

Most information available about using ground rules remains focused on the group—identifying what participants can do to keep the learning experience positive and productive for the group as a whole. For maximum learning and personal growth, there is a second level of expectations to include in the ground rules. At this level, the ground rules developed specifically define the role of each individual in taking leadership for the productivity of their own learning experience.

This second level describes what individual participants can do to create a learning experience that is positive for them and ultimately builds their capacity as lifelong learners in the early childhood profession. Individual ground rules promote strategies and skills that strengthen each participant's ability to process new information and begin applying what is learned to day-to-day work in early childhood settings. Ground rules established at both levels, group and individual, naturally support and strengthen one another. Taken together they set the stage for optimal learning.

GENERATING GROUND RULES

Planning for the development of ground rules begins with reflection on the training context. First, consider the length of the session. When a training session is two hours or less, come prepared with a short list of important ground rules and briefly introduce them to the group. To help build participant engagement, you can ask: "Are there other ground rules you would like to add?" To seek consensus for implementing the ground rules, you can say: "Give me a "thumbs up" if you agree to use these guidelines during our session today." You can also include feedback regarding the effectiveness of the ground rules on the session evaluation form.

In longer training sessions, it is still helpful to set the process of generating ground rules in motion by intro-ducing a few commonly used ground rules. These are more easily remembered when they are listed in catego-ries such as comfort, safety, and productivity. Within each category, encourage a brief discussion inviting participants to contribute their own ideas. When somebody proposes an idea/ground rule, ask the other participants if they agree to it. If most do, add it to the list in the proper category.

Ground rules for training events that meet over several weeks or months are best developed and agreed upon by the whole group. "The best way to create ground rules, if you have the time, is to allow the participants to generate the entire list" (EdChange, 2007). To encour-age the development of ground rules, remind partici-pants that teaching practices are not easily separated from personal experiences and beliefs. Ask participants to think about group dynamics that help them feel comfortable and productive when discussing important and frequently sensitive issues related to the teaching profession. If participants have difficulty coming up with ground rules or do not come up with one you feel is important, suggest the guideline and seek consensus for adding it to the list.

In addition to the length of the session, consider the experience of the group and the sensitivity of the session topic. For example, when working with novice groups, you may need to take more of a leadership role in setting the ground rules. When the session topic is especially sensitive, consider committing more time for the development of ground rules—even when the session itself is brief. In addition, your own history with a group or with individuals participating in the training

may guide you to plan a more or less involved process to establish ground rules for a particular session.

In all cases, ground rules should be posted—on the wall or at each table—and referred to throughout the session. Once developed, ground rules should be posted each time the same group meets together. Be ready to call attention to the ground rules when the opportunity presents itself to congratulate or remind the group of the guidelines they agreed to follow.

If a particular ground rule is routinely broken, offer participants a chance to discuss why they are not following that guideline and make changes if needed. If there is time, occasionally revisit the ground rules list and encourage participants to add new items when issues or challenges arise.

EXAMPLES OF GROUP GROUND RULES

Explicitly describing positive expectations for partici-pants can have a remarkable effect on learning out-comes. Whether you are generating a basic list of ground rules for a brief session or developing guidelines with a group that will be meeting over time, the follow-ing general categories of comfort, safety, and produc-tivity can support the process.

COMFORT

Just as continuous lecture has been generally eschewed in favor of active learning, sitting passively at attention while the trainer speaks has been replaced by a more relaxed learning atmosphere. This change has occurred for good reason—when participants begin anxiously waiting for a break to meet their need for a beverage, the chance to stretch, or a bathroom break, their ability to learn is essentially put on hold. Empowering participants to maximize the learning experience begins with the topic of comfort.

~ Save your backs. The environment should support learning by offering comfortable chairs in an arrange-ment that fosters engagement in learning activities. Having permission to stand, move around, or adjust the room arrangement encourages participants to take responsibility for personal comfort to support their ability to focus on the teaching/learning process.

~ Eat, drink, and be extraordinary! This phrase is a playful way of saying "take care of yourself." That means participants are free to get something to drink,

eat, or use the bathroom whenever they feel the need.

SAFETY

Learning always involves some risk. Admitting that you do not know "everything" while continuing to take full responsibility for the care and education of children in your program creates a sense of vulnerability. Opening the mind to new methods may cause participants to question values and beliefs that come from past family experiences as a child or current roles as parents. Creating a safe learning climate for exploring these sensitive issues is essential.

~ Accept and Respect Diversity. Remind participants that each person brings a unique perspective to the learning process. Group discussions and activities may uncover a range of differing views and experiences. Efforts to respect these differences enhance the learning experience for everyone.

~ Right to Pass. The "right to pass" is a respectful way of letting people have control over their involvement at any particular time. The "right to pass" honors the learner simply by removing the requirement to come up with a response just because it is his or her "turn" in the rotation! For some, the topic of discussion may evoke strong emotional responses they are not ready to process in a group setting.

~ Seek FIRST to Understand. The trainer is not the only teacher in the group. During planned discussions and learning activities, participants have multiple opportunities to learn with and from their peers. Human tendency leads us to discredit information that does not fit or match personal views. When participants make a conscious effort to seek first to understand the comments and experiences shared by others, it deepens learning and broadens perspectives.

~ Think/Talk Possibility. This ground rule sets the standard for positive thinking and interactions. Literally, it suggests that comments and discussions should focus on "what would it take" rather than "what would never work. . . ."

PRODUCTIVITY

Trainers and training participants dedicate valuable time and energy to the professional development process. While trainers can focus on developing a training plan that maximizes the use of time to support learning potential, engaging participants to use strate-

gies that support the group process is the only way to effectively implement that plan.

~ Be on Time. This mainly applies to longer workshops or ongoing training. While arriving on time for the session is usually obvious, it also applies to coming back together on time after breaks and after lunch as well.

~ Stay on Task. As with most ground rules, this one serves to remind participants that they have come for a purpose and that learning should be taken seriously. Because they have come together as a learning community, one person's tangent may diminish another person's opportunity to learn about the topic. Many trainers use a "parking garage" as a place to "park" ideas or questions that are significant to an individual but not relevant to the rest of the group or to the task at hand. These important but tangential issues can be addressed later at whatever length is needed.

~ Listening = Talking. Balancing the amount of time listening with the amount of time talking is best assessed by each individual participant. As participants monitor themselves, they will see how their learning is enhanced by following this guideline. Considering this idea at the beginning of a session has an amazingly positive effect. It encourages both the person who tends to talk a lot to listen more and the person who tends to listen a lot to talk more.

~ Limit Side Conversations. A number of trainers are not bothered by the occasional side comment; they typically assume such comments are usually relevant. Even when side conversations are on topic, they need to be addressed for two reasons. First, some participants are quite distracted by side conversations, so the length and sound level of side comments may need to be discussed by the group. Second, side conversations often increase when a fellow participant is speaking or reporting small group summaries to the larger group. It may be important to consider limiting side conversations completely during participant presentations.

~ Use Cell Phones Courteously. This is also where the subject of cell phone use can be addressed. While many trainers have established strict or inflexible "no cell phone" policies, it may be more reasonable to set ground rules that guide participants to monitor their own cell phone use during a session. Using "manner mode" and agreeing to quietly leave the room when an essential call is received may be the accommodation that allows some participants to attend your training while still remaining

accessible to meet the demands of important back-home responsibilities.

GENERATING INDIVIDUAL GROUND RULES

> By communicating that the student is the "chief agent" in the educational process, learning takes on a whole different perspective. ~ Maryellen Weimer

The new paradigm for effective teaching focuses on the reality that participants are ultimately responsible for their own learning. This way of thinking is grounded in the belief that adults learn best when they obtain knowledge <u>and</u> take the lead in interpreting and processing that knowledge within the context of individual experiences. As a trainer, you can deliver new ideas or facts and engage participants in well-planned learning activities, but you cannot "make" anyone learn. You can, however, create an environment that encourages each participant in taking the lead in their own learning by introducing a few relevant ground rules. These ground rules include: seek clarity; reflect; compare and contrast new information with existing beliefs/practices; and develop a personal action plan.

This approach can be difficult for participants who have years of experiences in classroom settings where the "teacher" tells them exactly what and how they want them to learn. By establishing individual ground rules, you help some participants discover (or rediscover) how to learn and take a leadership role. For more skilled lifelong learners, individual ground rules promote and affirm strategies essential to meaningful learning. There is no end to what can happen when individuals become aware of how they can turn attendance at "another workshop" into action to improve their ability to do their jobs well.

EXAMPLES OF INDIVIDUAL GROUND RULES

The following practices highlight proven and effective ways adults can take the lead in the teaching/learning process. Sometimes these practices can be built into activities planned during the session. At other times, participants can be encouraged to engage in these processes individually throughout the session.

~ Seek Clarity. Participants must take responsibility for asking questions and seeking explanations when they do not fully understand. When an individual is interested in learning about the topic at hand, he or she will not want to remain confused or misunderstand anything that is being taught. When an individual understands and is clear about what is being taught, he or she will find it more interesting! When you assume that each person is participating in this training because he or she expects to learn something, you will naturally want to encourage participants to seek clarity.

~ Compare/Contrast. As individuals listen or participate, they can be thinking about what is being said or done and how it compares with what they already know and do. Contrasting new learning with current practice prepares the individual for change and growth. Trainers can encourage engagement in this practice by asking questions and providing opportunities for consideration of the match between what is being taught and what participants currently know and do.

~ Reflect. Reflection is the conscious and intentional examination of behavior, ideas, and feelings generated by a learning experience. While it is important to offer multiple opportunities during training for participants to reflect, it is equally important to encourage participants to initiate reflection on their own. Participants will get the most benefit from the training when they frequently and intentionally reflect on how aspects of the training apply to them personally.

~ Develop a Personal Action Plan. The most effective way to increase the likelihood that participants use information from your session to enhance their teaching practices is their development of an action plan. An action plan takes one or two skills or practices learned during training and describes step-by-step how the participant will implement that skill or practice in the early childhood setting. An action plan is personal and based on the interests and needs of the individual.

Obviously, each person's action plan may look very different. However, it is helpful to provide participants with a guide for developing an individual action plan that includes the following elements:

1) a goal statement - what do you want to <u>do</u> when you return to your program?

2) action steps - what manageable, small steps will you take to implement your goal?

3) resources - what people/materials will you need in order to accomplish your goal?

4) a time line - when will each step be completed? When will the goal be achieved?

Conclusion

When a group of learners knows what behavior is expected, they are more likely to work together to create an effective learning environment. When participants are involved in the process of setting ground rules as much as possible (or, at the very least, agreeing to follow them), their active role in the learning process is confirmed.

Participants in training are sometimes described as "difficult" when, in fact, they may simply be confused about appropriate expectations. Setting ground rules helps participants monitor their own behavior and gives the trainer a place to go whenever challenges arise. ~

> The goal is not to agree—it is about hearing and exploring divergent perspectives. Participate to the fullest of your ability—community growth depends on the inclusion of every individual voice.   ~ EdChange, 2007

Resources*

* EdChange Multicultural Pavilion: Awareness Activities - Guide for Setting Ground Rules (2007), found at www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/groundrules.html