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# ~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

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## MAXIMIZING ADULT LEARNING: PROVIDING EFFECTIVE LEARNING ACTIVITIES

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You can't expect child care providers/teachers to be nurturing and caring if they are not being treated that way themselves. ~ unknown

### INTRODUCTION

As teachers and learners, we hope the days of endless lectures are behind us. Active involvement during (and after) training has been firmly established as essential in meeting the needs of adult learners. Effective trainers understand that involvement is crucial in helping the learner examine existing practices and beliefs, acquire knowledge, and gain the skills needed to put new ideas into practice. As a result, small group activities have become a mainstay of early childhood training sessions and higher education courses.

Besides small group activities, other techniques are also used to engage adult learners. These include providing round tables to promote discussion, building in time for questions and reflection, and promoting follow-up action plans. While there are many and diverse ways to engage adult learners, these methods share a critical element—each must be planned in order to have a positive and lasting impact on learning.

Activities are not time-fillers nor are they designed “just for fun”. You have probably attended sessions where you did not understand the directions, activities did not seem to relate to the topic, or you felt like the activities were fun but had little impact on your learning. Effective planning is the key to developing and implementing meaningful activities in training—activities that play a positive role in the learning process. While activities may indeed need to be enjoyable, it is important to begin by asking yourself one question during the planning process: Will this activity be meaningful and purposeful for the participants who are most likely to attend? Furthermore, will the activity help partici-

pants:

- make sense of an important concept?
- reflect on participants' attitudes and values?
- become comfortable in the training environment?
- forge positive relationships with fellow participants and the trainer?
- move new knowledge from short-term to long-term memory?
- develop a new skill participants can use?
- gain new information useable in the development of policies, practices, or everyday work with young children?

Once you have committed to providing meaningful teaching and learning activities in training sessions, there is a five-stage process you can use to enhance their effectiveness. The process includes: planning, facilitation, closure, evaluation, and education to help learners understand and value the paradigm shift from passive to active learning. Let's look at these stages one by one. When addressed, these steps lead to activities that are most likely to maximize learner engagement in the teaching/learning process.

### PLANNING STAGE

~ Review your goals and objectives for the training session. How can activities help support participant needs for knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes? Brainstorm activities that support your primary goals. For example, a warm-up activity for an outdoor play workshop might ask participants to introduce them-

selves and describe a favorite outdoor play activity from their childhood. This activity focuses on the topic, encourages participants to think about and examine the value they place on outdoor play, and still allows participants to meet one another.

- ~ Describe the types of activities you will use during the training in the description of your session. When you do this, participants will know what to expect and be prepared for an active learning experience.
- ~ Select appropriate group sizes for your activities. You can plan for participant involvement as a **whole group**, in **small groups** of 5 or 6 people, in **pairs**, or on an **individual** basis. While each type of involvement has advantages for encouraging participation, it is important to provide a balance of different group configurations within each training session and across a training series. Providing a balance of different configurations will not only help you meet your training goals but will allow for a range of participant learning preferences. Selecting appropriate group sizes for learning activities includes consideration of your training goals, total number of participants, the amount of time allotted, and the size and arrangement of the training space. For example, for a large group of participants, rows of chairs rather than tables can provide for a) full group engagement (stand up if . . . ), b) paired activities to allow processing and discussion without needing to move participants around or take time for comments, and c) individual reflection.
- ~ Decide how you will group participants for activities. Sometimes it is advantageous to allow participants to choose their seating and work groups. At other times, you may choose to assign groups to mix experienced and less experienced participants, to encourage interaction with new colleagues, or even to separate particularly disruptive pairs. Group assignment can be routine or creative—using stickers on name tags, counting off, or selection of candy varieties from pre-counted dishes.
- ~ Design each activity with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Decide how you will introduce the activity, how you will help participants stay on task, and determine the outcome of the activity. Plan a verbal introduction to the activity that will motivate and provide a clear description of the activity at hand. Develop a time frame that allows ample time for completion. Plan an “end result” for the activity to

support participant self-direction and completion —will the activity end with a written description, a thought to share with the group, or simply end with the small group discussion?

- ~ Participants need clear instructions to further support self-direction and completion. Even though you have planned a verbal introduction, make sure you have printed instructions or use an overhead. This helps participants review and reread if necessary to fully understand and follow the steps of the activity.
- ~ Make sure participants have the knowledge and skills they need to complete an activity accurately. When participants do not have a solid understanding of a new concept, a poorly planned activity will allow the group to “learn” and practice their misconceptions. To avoid this, it is important to provide review sheets with key information about the new concept so participants can check and double-check their understanding throughout the activity. If a new concept is complex, initial activities should be guided and self-correcting to support deeper understanding before engaging participants in more open-ended activities. Scripted role plays, scenarios with a “suggested” response to allow self-correction, or a quick “worksheet” provide participants with the materials to monitor and adjust their perceptions if needed before moving on to explore the idea more deeply.
- ~ Be prepared to modify your plans. Plan for contingencies, such as what you will do if time runs short, when attendance is higher than expected, or if the group appears uninvolved in the activity.

## FACILITATION STAGE

- ~ Once participants have arrived, create a safe and comfortable learning environment. Activities work best when participants feel comfortable enough to share ideas and experiences. Comfort is established when ground rules are set (see Training Solutions, Issue #1), and the trainer models a sense of acceptance and shared learning goals.
- ~ Help participants understand key roles that support small group work. For small group work, assign participants clear roles. Such roles as facilitator, recorder, and reporter promote the necessary skills for collaborative learning. These are skills participants may not have developed if their educational experiences followed traditional teaching styles.

~ Take a dynamic role during small group activities. Let participants know that you are available to clarify the task or to answer questions that arise. Carefully observe the progress of group work to determine the need to extend or reduce the time based on group progress. Check in with the overall group periodically with statements like this is the half-way mark in the time we have allotted for this activity—check in with your group members to gauge progress. Your checking in with the group allows participants to make decisions, check their own progress, and adjust accordingly. Your active role may mean that you sometimes stand back but are available to the groups to come to you if they require assistance. Or, you might decide to visit the groups on a rotating basis to check for accuracy and progress by asking *Is this an okay time for me to join your group?*

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

One early childhood director quickly discovered that the way she asked and responded to questions was important in setting the tone and comfort level during the session. In one of her first staff training sessions, she opened the workshop by asking, "What is the most important guidance rule when working with children with AD/HD?" She was looking for a specific answer—focus on positive rather than negative behaviors. Her staff eagerly began tossing out ideas—consistency, working with the family, clear communication of expectations, etc. To each of these ideas, the director responded, "No, that's not what I'm looking for."

As might be expected, the director and the staff began to feel frustrated, important guidance strategies were not being validated, and the staff quit offering ideas. Throughout the remainder of the session, the director's frustration grew because she simply could not regain the initial enthusiasm of the group. From this experience, she learned to:

1. Ask open-ended questions, such as "I wonder . . ." and "what are your ideas about . . . ?"
2. Respond to participant responses positively and encourage deeper thinking, by using phrases like "It sounds like you have really been thinking about this issue" and "That's one idea. What else?"
3. Avoid strong responses, even when they are positive. "That's the best idea I've heard!" can make the respon-

dent uncomfortable and inhibit others from responding because the best idea is already taken.

### CLOSURE STAGE

- ~ Providing adequate closure for an activity is a critical step in facilitating small group activities. How will participants respond at the end of the activity? Examples of closing activities include a written report (flip chart list) from the group, individual reflection, the development of an action plan, or an 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 reports of the most important idea explored by each group, touring each group to see and hear about each groups' product, or a more formal peer teaching method when each group has explored a unique topic.
- ~ The method of bringing closure to an activity is determined somewhat by the goals of the activity. If the activity is primarily an opportunity to explore participant values and feelings, completion of the small group activity probably provides adequate closure. If you desire a more formal ending to this type of activity, you can use a written reflection sheet for individual participants to complete or you can invite groups to share their discoveries with the large group. However, if the activity was designed to help participants explore learning content or put new ideas to practice, you may desire a more formal closing activity. The closing activity in this case should allow you and participants to check for accuracy of interpretations and provide information about ongoing training and implementation needs.

### EVALUATION STAGE

- ~ Provide participants with the opportunity to evaluate the activity. Evaluation can be verbal or written using probing questions or open-ended sentences to measure satisfaction with the group process, comfort level, and perceived learning benefits. Such questions might include: Did you have the opportunity to speak and listen? What were the strengths of your group in completing this activity? What were the difficulties? Would you like to participate in this type of activity again? Why or why not? What would you change about this activity? Open-ended sentences

might include: "The most important thing I learned from this activity was . . ." or "This activity helped me practice a new skill that I can use in my program - yes, unsure, no, and comments."

- ~ Perhaps the ultimate goal of well-planned activities is to help participants transfer new concepts and ideas to the context of their own program. For this reason, follow-up assessment can be quite valuable. Let participants know that you are interested in how the session supported them in using what they have learned. If possible, plan a brief observation visit, ask a program director to document use (or non-use) of the new skill, or plan follow-up phone calls to check in with a few participants a week or two after the training. Work to put participants at ease by reminding them that you are checking up on yourself so you can enhance your facilitation skills.
- ~ Use the feedback you receive. One of the joys of training is the close connection between the teaching and learning process. Each time you try a new idea, you have the opportunity to learn, to "tweak", and to try again!

## EDUCATION STAGE

The shift to active learning has been a long, slow process. Many adult learners grew up on a steady diet of lecture in their educational experiences. It may be difficult for them to value activities as a meaningful way to learn. In addition, they may not have had the opportunity to learn skills (collaboration, problem-solving, goal-setting, critical thinking) that are required for successful participation in active learning sessions.

- ~ Help participants make the shift from passive, lecture-based learning to active learning by helping them value activities you have planned. Start by teaching about active learning. You might say, Adult learners tend to remember about 10% of what they hear. That means that if I just lecture, you will really be getting just 12 minutes of approved training tonight. I want the two hours we have together to make better use of your time than that so I have planned an activity that will allow you to. . . .
- ~ Clearly review the goals of the activity so participants understand the purpose and rationale. You might say, This case study will allow you to practice the steps we just learned so you will be more comfortable using it when you get back to your program.

Also, you will be able to identify the components you understand well and any areas that aren't quite clear yet. We'll work together at the end of the activity to address the questions that arise.

- ~ Include yourself in the list of learners! Many seasoned trainers readily admit to walking out of conference sessions when the shift to a learning activity is made! Their rationale goes something like this: I came to hear what the presenters (experts) had to say, not to talk with the other participants. It may be that many trainers are still working to make this paradigm shift from passive to active learning as well. Be sure to seek out emerging information about adult learners and brain research to help you fully understand and truly value active learning. Engage in the learning activity the next time you are a participant to develop your understanding of the participant perspective. Keep a journal that critiques these activities—listen to the other participants, build on the strategies used by other trainers that worked, and identify and avoid the pitfalls of poorly planned activities you observe as well.

Educators seeking self-direction from adult learners are not merely asking them to take on new skills, modify their learning style, or increase their self-confidence. They are asking many to change the way they understand themselves, their world, and the relationship between the two.

~ Robert Kegan

## CONCLUSION

Early childhood trainers lead busy lives that often include multiple responsibilities in addition to designing and implementing training. Once in a while, it is good to sit back and reflect on the reason you provide training in the first place. Most likely, reflection will lead you to think about your role in helping to build the quality of early care and education experiences for providers/teachers and the children and families they serve. This is a significant goal and can only be achieved when training is designed to make a difference.

Adult learning sessions must be planned to promote learning and change in attitudes and values, knowledge, and skills. Effectively using activities that engage learners in exploring and using new concepts in meaningful ways will bring you and your participants one step closer to reaching your goals.

## RESOURCES\*

\*<http://www.bowperson.com>

This is the web site for professional speaker and trainer Sharon L. Bowman, M.A. Sharon has written several books that focus on rationale and activities for engaging adult learners. While you can access information about the books sold on the site, clicking on "free articles" will open a rich source of quick tips

and ideas for helping passive listeners become active learners.

\*<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/teachtip.htm>

This Faculty Development site offers a "Teaching Tips Index" by topic. Two that I found interesting were "How People Learn" and "Teaching Techniques".

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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](mailto: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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