~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

An e-newsletter supporting effective adult learning practices

GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE LEARNING

Written by Susan Harper-Whalen

What students learn is greatly influenced by how they are taught.

~ National Science Teaching Standards ~

INTRODUCTION

Adult learning experts advocate a blend of short lectures and meaningful learning activities for promoting knowledge, developing skills, and reflecting on values and attitudes during training sessions. Meaningful learning is more likely when mini-lectures are 20 minutes or less and followed immediately with opportunities to actively process the information just presented.

Planning a two-hour training session will most likely require selecting several applicable learning activities in a way that carefully blends information and active learning. Active processing can be accomplished by using brief activities, such as paired discussions, and by using more complex group activities, such as case studies or peer teaching.

You can help training participants shift from expecting passive, lecture-based teaching to an active learning model by reviewing the basic principles of adult learning that have influenced your decision to use an active learning approach. You might explain that you know that meaningful learning is more likely to occur when learners are active participants—discussing, practicing, debating, and reflecting on knowledge, skills, and values.

Fortunately, training resources abound; they include published lists of warm-up activities, books describing countless games and strategies to promote learner participation, and creative ideas gleaned from accomplished trainers. It is much harder to find information about how to select appropriate activities, particularly guidance for selecting those that can best support the learning outcomes for a specific training topic.

The following guidelines can help you assess an activity's relevance and usefulness in training about any topic. The guidelines are grouped to help you think about each potential activity as it relates to four critical elements:

A) Recommended early childhood training practices

B) Specific features of the training content or topic

C) Known and unknown characteristics of participants

D) Components of the learning activity itself

A) RECOMMENDED TRAINING PRACTICES

~ Does the activity align with professional guidelines for the education of early childhood practitioners?

Each time you plan a training session, two important sets of guidelines, both established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), must be taken into consideration. First, NAEYC's Conceptual Framework for Early Childhood Professional Development identifies key principles of effective professional development. This position statement was explored in previous editions of Training Solutions (Issues #2 and #3). Second, NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct: Supplement for Early Childhood Adult Educators specifically outlines the professional responsibilities of early childhood trainers. This 2004 document and the position statement are available on the NAEYC web site at http://www.naeyc.org/.

These guidelines are particularly important to you as an early childhood trainer for two reasons: 1) much that has been written about training activities comes from

the business world and may represent a philosophy that does not fit with recommended practice in early childhood and 2) training activities have been a "hot topic" for some time now, and while a multitude of resource books and web sites exist, quality is not guaranteed.

It is your job to evaluate and select activities according to meaningful criteria, and these two sets of guidelines are valuable resources. As a beginning trainer, you may want to use the NAEYC guidelines as a checklist for evaluating activities each time you plan a session. When you are a seasoned trainer, a periodic review of these documents may be beneficial and help keep your training practices on track.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

An early childhood trainer was excited to attend a "train-the-trainer" session being offered by a well known professional from the business field. During the session, she recorded many active learning strategies being used by this "expert" so she could remember them to promote learning in her own training sessions. At one point in the session, with pen poised, she watched the trainer give foam balls to each participant with instructions to throw the balls at other participants if their questions or comments were off task. Her understanding of early childhood professional development guidelines—specifically the charge to support the self-esteem of each participant—helped her quickly identify this practice as inappropriate for use in quality early childhood training!

B) FEATURES OF THE CONTENT/TOPIC

~ Does the activity clearly fit the learning outcomes I have identified for the session?

As an early childhood trainer, you probably identify two types of goals for each training session: topic-related learning goals that target the knowledge, skills, and values you want participants to explore during the workshop or course and overall learning goals that address the learning outcomes you strive to achieve in every session you facilitate regardless of the topic. Overall goals might include developing a sense of community in the learning environment, promoting lifelong learning, and providing an enjoyable learning experience.

As you develop topic-related goals for a particular session, establishing clear learning outcomes will help you select meaningful activities. Learning outcomes that focus on knowledge (knowing key concepts related to a topic) lend themselves to activities that allow participants to recall and check their understanding, such as matching games or peer teaching. An example of this type of outcome might be: through participation in this session, providers will learn three strategies for arranging the environment to prevent challenging behavior.

Skill-based learning outcomes directly relate to participants' ability to use new knowledge in day-to-day practice. These outcomes are best achieved through activities that simulate the "real world," such as reviewing a video, participating in role play, or practicing a skill with materials brought into the workshop setting. An example of this type of outcome might be: through participation in this session, providers will practice rearranging a learning center using prevention-based strategies.

Learning outcomes related to attitudes and values can effectively be supported using open-ended learning activities. These activities might include reflecting on a true story, building a sculpture, or participating in a debate. An example of this type of outcome might be: through participation in this session, providers will value room arrangement as the first step in an effective child guidance approach.

It is also important to be aware of your overall goals for the training session you are facilitating. For example, one of the most common overall goals established by trainers is to create a connected learning community. Many trainers use a range of warm-up activities to support achievement of this goal. However, while getting acquainted and feeling comfortable are important adult learning strategies, it is essential to make these welcome activities more meaningful to participants by relating them to the training topic. For example, if you plan to begin a session by asking participants to introduce themselves, adjust the activity slightly to promote discussion of the session topic as well. One way this might be accomplished is by seating participants in small groups and giving them a topic-related quote to discuss together during introductions.

~ Will the activity effectively use training time?

Training time is precious for trainers and participants.

Avoid falling into the trap of working so hard to make training "fun" that content or learning is sacrificed. The first step you can take to avoid this common trap is to have a crystal clear idea of the key learning outcomes for your training session. In addition, you need to identify whether any one outcome is more important or less important than another. The complexity and time allotted to each activity must be proportional to the significance of the learning outcome.

Interestingly, following this guideline often leads to a <u>decrease</u> in the number of learning outcomes chosen for a training session. When participants have adequate time to complete selected learning activities, you have an achievable number of learning goals for the session. If participants are rushed from one activity to another or if they must stop before finishing, you have either too many activities or too many learning objectives or both! Take the time to narrow your learning goals.

The second step is to evaluate each learning activity for its ability to enhance learning about the key concepts Choose activities that BEST address the key concepts. Quality over quantity is a principle that truly leads to better learning outcomes. Try to remember your own learning process, and ask yourself if the activity would have helped <u>you</u> as a learner. How do you evaluate?

~ Get down to the details. Step by step, identify what a provider needs to know, do, and value in order to achieve each core learning outcome.

~ Check the activity to be sure it fits with the objective. Have you skipped to a more advanced skill without addressing basic skills? Does the activity allow practice of each step in the process of acquiring the new skill?

~ If you have offered this training before, refer to past evaluations for evidence whether or not a particular training activity was meaningful to participants.

~ Does the activity fit the complexity of the concept?

As you examine learning outcomes for your training sessions, you will find that some are more complex than others. When a skill consists of multiple interrelated parts and requires a significant shift in current thinking and practice, it becomes a more complex skill to learn. For example, shifting to a positive child guidance approach involves rethinking just about everything providers do in their day-to-day work with young children—from how they set up the environment, the daily schedule, and the way they talk with children to what they think about how children learn. This complex learning outcome requires more rigorous learning activities. Observation, consistent feedback, comparing and contrasting current practices with new information, developing step-by-step action plans, and self-evaluation are suitable activities for complex learning objectives.

On the other hand, simple learning outcomes, such as learning effective handwashing practices, are less connected to other components of providers' beliefs and practices. Activities for less complex learning outcomes can require less time and complexity.

C) CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

~ Does the activity fit the group size?

Perhaps you have participated in a warm-up activity where each person was asked one-by-one to state their name, their role and agency, and what they hoped to get from the training session. If the training was for a small group of participants, this activity may have helped develop a sense of connection among members of the group. However, if the group was large and the introductory activity seemed to continue "forever," you already know that group size is highly relevant to selecting effective learning activities.

Meaningful activities engage most of the learners most of the time. Consider activities that encourage participants to discuss a topic. Whole group discussions allow one or two individuals to actively participate while many others remain passive: obviously, the larger the group, the smaller the percentage of contributing participants.

Well-constructed small group discussions (4-6 individuals) or discussion pairs, on the other hand, allow almost everyone to safely participate no matter what the group size. So, when you select an activity, consider the size of the group and how many people will be actively engaged during the activity.

~ Does the activity fit the skill level(s) of the group?

To enhance the ability of each individual participant to achieve their learning goals, the activities you develop should match individual skill levels and stages of development to the greatest extent possible. As a general rule, activities planned for beginners should provide a high level of feedback to participants. For example,

following a small group discussion with a summary of key ideas will allow learners to check their own understanding. Beginners want and need to know that the outcome of the activity or discussion they have just engaged in aligns with appropriate practice. Providing self-correction opportunities also helps you make sure that the activity is truly supporting learning. Without a self-correction feature, there is a risk that learners who misunderstand the concept will participate in the activity while learning incorrect information.

Learners with advanced knowledge and experience in the topic area can manage more complex activities that engage learners in open-ended discussions and processes. Even then, it is important for the trainer to check in with groups periodically or provide some form of self-checking to make sure the activity is reinforcing accurate information.

When skill levels vary widely, which is often the case, activities can be designed to address a continuum of skill levels—such as offering multiple learning centers addressing different facets of the topic. Other options include creating groups that include participants with a range of skill levels, assigning an experienced learner the role of facilitator for the group activity, and pairing more experienced participants with less experienced ones.

~ **Do the learning activities I have chosen include enough variety to appeal to different learning styles?**

One of the greatest advantages of active learning during a training session is that you can present important content in ways that appeal to different learning styles. Across the session, whether it is two hours or two days, you should offer learning activities that engage learners through visual, tactile, and auditory channels. If you already have a small group discussion planned for the training, select the next activity by looking for something using a different mode, such as a demonstration or video clip. The key learning objectives—the concepts you most want people to remember and use—can be strongly reinforced by allowing learners to participate in a variety of activities that require different approaches to learning.

D) COMPONENTS OF ACTIVITIES

~ **Can I explain the purpose, goals, and sequential steps of the activity to participants?**

Learning activities are more likely to go well and influence learning if participants clearly understand the reasons for the activity in the first place. Review the goals of each learning activity with participants so they understand the purpose and rationale for participating in the activity. You might say the next step is to complete a think-pair-share activity. During this activity, each of you will have the opportunity to review key points, engage in discussion, and construct your own definition of a positive child guidance approach.

Provide written instructions for participants to refer to throughout the task, clearly describing what to do first, second, and third. Give participants clear roles for small group work (facilitator, timekeeper, recorder, reporter, cheerleader). Doing this promotes the necessary skills for collaborative learning, skills participants may not have developed if their educational experiences have followed traditional teaching styles.

~ **Does the activity minimize the risk of putting any one in an uncomfortable situation?**

While making mistakes is a part of the learning process, most people would rather make mistakes in a private setting. Choose activities that allow individuals to safely "pass" or require group effort to solve problems.

Avoid activities that could put people on the spot or make them feel threatened in any way. Some very effective learning activities, such as role-play, carry a certain level of threat to a person's sense of safety. Even relatively common early childhood training activities, such as art work or music and movement, may create differing levels of concern for learners; plan ahead to minimize discomfort and promote learning.

~ **Have I reduced competition in the activity?**

Competition can inhibit learning if participants' mistakes might jeopardize their group or team. Too much focus on competition in training sessions curbs development of networking relationships and collaboration skills. If you feel the need for incentives, the entire group can applaud themselves to celebrate their learning. Or, you can provide a sweet treat to celebrate the "sweet taste of learning" for all who participated in the activity.

CONCLUSION

These guidelines will help you integrate what you actually do during training sessions with what you hope

to accomplish in learning outcomes for participants. Activities designed to support knowledge acquisition, practice skills, and explore values and attitudes are key to creating meaningful learning experiences. You can find and use many resources about learning activities, including books, web sites, and train-the-trainer sessions. You can also adapt and use activities from training sessions you attend. However, making these activities meaningful and purposeful for the participants in your sessions is clearly up to you.

You can design training activities that support providers in reaching their full potential or risk offering training that is, quite frankly, a waste of time for both of you. By setting your own stringent guidelines for developing and evaluating learning activities, you are choosing to make a difference in the quality of early care and education for providers themselves as well as the children and families in their programs.

> Keep on the lookout for novel and interesting ideas that others have used successfully. Your idea has to be original only in its adaptation to the problem you're currently working on. ~ Thomas Edison