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## A brief guide to adult learning

### • Introduction

This new section provides training materials for participatory learning. We plan to focus on a different topic for each issue. This article describes how adults learn and how this can be used to facilitate participatory learning.

Learning is not usually an outcome of formal teaching. Instead it comes from a process of self-development through experience (Box 1). In almost every training situation, you will encounter a diverse group of people with different training needs. The learning approaches you use should cater to these different needs.

**BOX 1**  
**HOW ADULTS LEARN**

- Adults are voluntary learners. They perform best when they have decided to attend a training session for a particular reason. They have a right to know why a session is relevant or important to them.
- Adults have usually come with an intention to learn. If this motivation is not supported, they will switch off or stop attending.
- Adults have experience and can help each other learn through an atmosphere of sharing.
- Adults learn best when they are actively involved.
- Adults learn best when the context of the training is relevant to their own lives and experiences.

Most trainers do not pay sufficient attention to individual training capacity. Yet the capacity to learn is influenced by the *ability* of trainers to:

- involve themselves fully, openly and without bias in new experiences;

- reflect on and observe these experiences from many perspectives;
- create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories; and,
- use these theories to make decisions and solve problems.



Learning occurs best through active involvement. This implies that the process of learning (or training) matters more than the actual subject. Adults have a particular problem with learning. As we grow older our short term memory becomes less efficient. We find it harder to translate what we see or hear to long term memory. Any method that relies too heavily on short term memory, such as lectures and lessons, is doomed to fail.

For learning to take place, new ideas and practices must be internalised. Unless trainees or participants are motivated, they will not and cannot learn. Throughout any course, workshop or session, you must tap into and keep stimulating the motivation of participants. A key element of motivation is strong self-esteem in participants so it is important to seek ways of building on this (Box 2).

**BOX 2**  
**TRAINER'S MOTIVATION CHECKLIST**

- Do you know why the participants are present?
- Have they been asked to state their personal goals and what they hope to achieve by the end of the course?
- Do you have a system of feedback on motivation during the course?
- Is there provision for feedback at the end of the course on whether they have achieved their goals?
- Do you have a system for guiding participants whose motivation or goals are not well matched to your or the group's?
- Do you have a system for monitoring and controlling latecomers, poor work, inattentiveness?

Good communication and the free exchange of information is at the heart of all training and human resource development. However, there are many barriers to communication in groups. When involved in a learning process which requires behavioural change, many trainees become embarrassed and feel threatened or vulnerable. Many responses that we, as trainers, may give in such situations might seem helpful but can increase the feeling of pressure and isolation. For example, providing a solution or advice can imply that the trainee is too stupid to figure out the problem. When we moralise or lecture, we imply that our values are more important than their feelings.

Many observations are sent as non-verbal cues (e.g posture, eye contact). A sensitive trainer will pick up both verbal and non-verbal indications of strong emotions. Remember that what people say is not always what they mean: try to read behind what is being expressed.

If making assumptions and ignoring feelings prevents good communication, then helping a person to express his/her feelings will help build it. How well do you listen? Using skills to listen is one of the most helpful things we can do. Different ways to achieve this and respond openly include:

- *Passive listening.* Remain silent and let the person talk. Communicate interest through non verbal behaviour.
- *Acknowledgements.* Use brief expressions that communicate understanding and acceptance, such as 'I see' or 'aha'.

- *Door openers.* Instead of direct questions use expressions which invite the person to expand on or continue expressing their ideas. For example 'I'd like to hear more about that'.
- *Content paraphrase.* Repeat what you've hear to confirm accurate understanding, such as 'So you're suggesting that....'.
- *Active listening.* Help the person to understand both the thoughts and feelings of their communication by describing your impressions of what has been said, such as 'Her response has been disappointing to you'.
- *Provision of support.* Respond to legitimate needs of support by providing information.



By listening carefully to feedback you can gauge how well the issues under discussion are being understood. But do not let your emotions get in the way: when faced with criticism it is easy to become defensive. Be careful not to block participants' free expression by showing your impatience or scepticism. Try to understand the opposing perspective and try not to over-react.

Some of the characteristics of a good trainer (Box 3) can be attributed to people's personality. Others can be learned or improved through practice. Most importantly, though, the learning of facilitation requires you to be self-

critical about your own performance as a trainer at each stage of the session or workshop.

## BOX 3

**WHAT MAKES A GOOD TRAINER?**

- a warm personality, an ability to show approval and acceptance.
- social skill, an ability to bring the group together without dominating it .
- a teaching manner that generates and uses the ideas and skills of participants.
- organising ability, so that the session flows without logistical problems.
- skills in noticing and resolving participants' problems.
- flexibility in responding to participants' changing needs.
- knowledge of the subject matter.

How you communicate with participants will depend on whether you are manipulating the group or facilitating it. There is a big difference between the two approaches. Manipulation is trainer-centred. You are in charge and everyone knows it. While it is essential that you are clear about the learning objectives, facilitation is a more learner-centred approach. You are helping other to learn and you will be learning too.

Giving constructive feedback and encouraging self-reflection are critical skills. If you do not let participants know when they are doing things well, they will not be able to reinforce the good things they are doing. There are five simple rules to giving feedback:

- *Give the feedback as soon as possible.*
- *Limit comments to two or three aspects of good or bad performance.*
- *Don't immediately correct mistakes yourself*, such help creates dependency, let the trainees learn through helping themselves.
- *Give praise first* before offering negative comments. Build trainees self-esteem.
- *Criticise the performance, not the person.* Whenever you offer feedback, make sure it encourages the participant to act upon it.

BOX 4  
**TRAINER'S CHECKLIST TO ADULT LEARNING**

- is the atmosphere friendly and inviting?
- have you made plans to relieve anxieties that trainees might feel?
- will your teaching methods build on and use the skills of participants?
- will learners be 'rewarded' for their contributions?
- does the work allow participants to measure their own progress?
- do you make it clear that you are available for additional support, if required?
- are the first few minutes of your sessions attention-grabbing or do you lose people from the start?
- do you build in regular opportunities for feedback, reinforcement and practice?
- are you avoiding lectures or at least limiting them to 10-20 minutes?



## NOTE

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Next issue: You, the trainer and facilitator