

Reference Guide for Instructors and Facilitators



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A FACILITATOR'S ROLE

As a group facilitator, you help a group to discuss an issue, make a decision or solve a problem. You keep the group moving, and always towards agreed upon goals. By listening, observing and using your intuition, you are also very aware of individual needs and desires. While the group focuses on the task, you focus not only on the process but also the people.

It doesn't matter what sort of discussion is needed. With the proper facilitation skills and knowledge, you can help any group achieve its goals efficiently and enjoyably. The following pages describe some mistakes made by facilitators and introduce some basic topics that are critical to facilitating adult learning effectively.

ADULT LEARNING

PRINCIPLES OF ADULT LEARNING

- *Adults are people with years of experience and a wealth of information.* Focus on the strengths learners bring to the classroom, not just gaps in their knowledge. Provide opportunities for dialogue within the group. Tap their experience as a major source of enrichment to the class. Remember that you, the facilitator, do not need to have all the answers, as long as you know where to go or who to call to get the answers. Students can be resources to you and to each other.
- *Adults have established values, beliefs and opinions.* Demonstrate respect for differing beliefs, value systems and lifestyles. Let your learners know that they are entitled to their values, beliefs and opinions, but that everyone in the room may not share their beliefs.
- *Adults are people whose style and pace of learning has evolved.* Use a variety of teaching strategies such as small group problem solving, and discussion. Use auditory, visual, tactile and participatory teaching methods. The ability to learn is not impaired by age. Most adults prefer teaching methods other than lecture.
- *Adults relate new knowledge and information to previously learned information and experiences.* Know the specific learning needs of your audience before your class or at the beginning of the class. Present single concepts and focus on application of concepts to relevant practical situations. Summarize frequently to increase

retention and recall. Material outside of the context of participants' experiences and knowledge becomes meaningless.

- *Adults are people with bodies influenced by gravity.* Plan frequent breaks, even if they are 2-minute "stretch" breaks. During a lecture, a short break every 45-60 minutes is sufficient. In more interactive teaching situations, breaks can be spaced 60-90 minutes apart.
- *Adults have pride.* Support the students as individuals. Self-esteem and ego are at risk in a classroom environment that is not perceived as safe or supportive. People will not ask questions or participate in learning if they are afraid of being put down or ridiculed. Allow people to admit confusion, ignorance, fears, biases and different opinions. Acknowledge or thank students for their responses and questions. Treat all questions and comments with respect. Avoid saying "I just covered that" when someone asks a repetitive question. Remember, the only foolish question is the unasked question.
- *Adults have a deep need to be self-directing.* Engage the students in a process of mutual inquiry. Avoid merely transmitting knowledge or expecting total agreement. Don't "spoon-feed" the participants.
- *Individual differences among people increase with age.* Take into account differences in style, time, types and pace of learning. Use auditory, visual, tactile and participatory teaching methods.
- *Adults tend to have a problem-centered orientation to learning.* Emphasize how learning can be applied in a practical setting. Use case studies, problem solving groups, and participatory activities to enhance learning. Adults generally want to immediately apply new information or skills to current problems or situations.

Note: New information and skills must be relevant and meaningful to the concerns and desires of the students. Know what the needs are of individuals in your class. Students do not wish to learn what they will never use. The learning environment must be physically and psychologically comfortable.

ADULTS AS LEARNERS

Part of being an effective instructor involves understanding how adults learn best. Compared to children and teens, adults have special needs and requirements as learners. The field of adult learning was pioneered by Malcolm Knowles. He identified the following characteristics of adult learners:

- Adults are **autonomous** and **self-directed**. They need to be free to direct themselves. Their teachers must actively involve adult participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators for them. They should allow the participants to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership. They have to be sure to act as facilitators, guiding participants to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts. Finally, they must show participants how the class will help them reach their objectives.
- Adults have accumulated a foundation of **life experiences** and **knowledge** that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base. To help them do so, facilitators should draw out participants' experience and their knowledge that is relevant to the topic. Facilitators must relate theories and concepts to the participants and recognize the value of experience in learning.
- Adults are **goal-oriented**. Upon entering in a class, they usually know what goal they want to attain. They, therefore, appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined elements. Facilitators must show participants how this class will help them attain their goals. This classification of goals and course objectives must be done early in the course.
- Adults are **relevancy-oriented**. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them. Therefore, facilitators must identify objectives for adult participants before the course begins. This means, also, that theories and concepts must be related to a setting familiar to participants.
- Adults are **practical**, focusing on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. Facilitators must tell participants explicitly how the lesson will be useful to them on the job.
- As do all learners, adults need to be shown **respect**. Instructors must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the classroom. These adults should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely in class.

LEARNING STYLES

Different people learn in different ways. It is important to understand these learning styles so they may be incorporated into the classroom activities. Classroom activities can include four basic learning styles.

Concrete experience – People who primarily use this learning style prefer an experience-based approach to learning. They want to jump in and see how it feels. They do not want to read about it, they want to experience it. People high in the Concrete learning approach learn best by from simulations, exercises, and feedback from fellow students.

Reflective observation – People who primarily use this style prefer to sit back, observe and not get involved. They want to see what a situation looks like before jumping in. People high in the Reflective learning approach learn best from lectures, films and video tapes, reading, and reflecting back on what has been read, and from classroom discussions about observations and thoughts.

Abstract conceptualization – People who use this style prefer a theory-based, analytical approach to learning. They want to study the topic and think about it before jumping in. People high in the Abstract learning approach learn best from lectures by experts, theoretical readings, case studies, and activities that require solitary thinking.

Active experimentation – People who use this style prefer to learn by becoming involved in a subject. They take a step-by-step active approach. People high in the Active learning approach learn best from small group discussions, structured exercises, trial-and-error exercises, and problem-solving approaches to relevant issues.

Teaching two or more styles results in higher retention. That is, students remember more when a variety of learning styles are incorporated.

INSTRUCTIONAL EVENTS

There are nine general Instructional Events which are always relevant, even though in detail they will vary with the type of learning outcome being achieved, and with the specific content of the learning. (Gagne, 1965)

Instructional Event	Learning Process
Gaining attention	To ensure reception of coming instruction we give the learner a stimulus
Tell learners the learning objective	Tell the learner what they will be able to do because of the instruction
Stimulating of recall prior to learning	Ask for a recall of existing relevant knowledge
Presenting the stimulus	Display the content
Provide the learning guidance	Help understanding by providing organization and relevance
Eliciting performance	Ask the learner to respond, demonstrating learning
Providing feedback	Give informative feedback on the learner's performance
Assessing performance	Require more learner performance, and give feedback, to reinforce learning
Enhancing retention and transfer to their contexts	Provide varied practice to generalize the capability

These instructional events can be used to generate an instructor checklist to assure that each event is addressed. We have provided a generic checklist on the next page and we suggest that you develop one customized for each instructional project in which you are involved.

Preparation Checklist for Instructional Events

Event	Checklist items
Gaining attention	<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare a visual that relates to the coming topic. If the topic is "equilateral triangles" a visual of different types of triangles would be appropriate. <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare a motivating statement that ties the topic to something relevant in the life of the learner. An example would be "Understanding equilateral triangles will help you be better engineers."
Identify adjective	<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare a statement of objectives describing exactly what learners will learn. <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare a statement of what the learners will be able to do because of the instruction.
Recall prior learning	<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare questions to get learners to recall what they know about the topic or how topical knowledge can be used. An example would be "Where do you see triangles used in construction?" <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare questions to review past learning about the subject. An example would be "What is the definition of a triangle? or What is the definition of an equilateral triangle?"
Present stimulus	<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare learner materials. <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare visuals to support auditory presentation. For example, we could show a visual of equilateral triangles and describe their properties. <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare lesson plans that will guide presentation of learning materials to learners.
Guide learning	<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare materials to support development of examples. In the case of our triangles, this might require a protractor, and a ruler. <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare discussion questions regarding ways in which the topic relates to other knowledge already possessed by the learners.
Elicit performance	<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare tasks that will be performed by the learners to demonstrate that the learning objectives have been met. <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare materials to support the performance tasks to be accomplished by the learners
Provide feedback	<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare performance evaluation criteria to be used to assess performance elicited in the prior instructional event. <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare feedback forms which will be given to learners describing performance standards and comparing their performance to the standards.
Assess performance	<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare practice scenarios so that the learner can accomplish the learning tasks several times. <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare materials to support accomplishment of the practice scenarios.
Enhance retention & transfer	<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare situation descriptions that require the learners to generalize what has just been learned to similar but not identical situations. <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare discussion questions that will help the learners understand how the topic just learned can be applied to their everyday lives.

MEASURING LEARNING

Measuring learning outcomes is not an optional activity. It is absolutely essential to effective instruction. That doesn't mean that instructors must administer tests to the learners. It simply means if you don't check to see whether the learners are ready to move on, you're likely to leave them in the dust. Note that "Eliciting performance" and "Providing feedback" are items six and seven in the Instructional Events discussed in the previous section. It is difficult to provide feedback on learning without having first measured the learning that has taken place

Certainly, the need to confirm that your listener is keeping up with you is not a surprise. We frequently "check for understanding" in our daily conversation. Whenever we casually ask "do you see what I mean" we are checking for understanding. We are measuring learning outcomes. We are making certain that the listener is keeping up with us.

Measurement, in the context of training, ranges from frequent, informal checks for understanding to formal tests covering the content of the instruction. If formal testing is available, well and good. However, formal tests are no substitute for staying in touch with the evolving level of understanding of each and every learner in the classroom. Some guidelines for informally assessing learner understanding are listed below.

- Look for quizzical looks. Furrowed brows and shaking heads often indicate lack of understanding. Saying something like "John, you look puzzled. Is there some confusion I can help clear up?" provides an opening for John to give you some data on his rate of learning.
- Confirm the adequacy of your answers. Sometimes we believe we have answered a question when, from the learner's standpoint, we have not. After we answer a question, we can ask "does my answer fully address your issue?" This gives the person who asked the question opportunity to re-focus the question or to confirm their level of understanding.
- Provide opportunity for practice. Use role-plays, simple simulations or other processes to give learners a chance to apply newly learned skills. Closely monitor the results of these practice exercises. This will give you data on both the level of understanding of the material and on the ability of the learners to apply the material to the work situation.

- Provide for some small-group discussion. Learners are more likely to expose their ignorance to a small group than to a large one. As an instructor you can circulate among small groups and overhear discussions. When you hear a small group getting off track, you can intervene and provide some just-in-time learning.
- Periodically ask discussion questions of the entire group. Discussion questions are open-ended and encouraging in-depth thought about the topic under discussion. By open-ended we mean that they cannot be answered by a one or two-word response such as "yes" or "no."

FACILITATION ISSUES AND COMMON MISTAKES

1. Always work with learners in ways that maintain or enhance their self-esteem. Asking Anne to answer a question when it is not likely she will have the correct answer does nothing to help learning and it puts Anne under stress. On the other hand, if you are sure that Anne can answer the question, calling on her can enhance Anne's self esteem.
2. Build on the principal that learners acquire and retain information most effectively when that information is available to multiple sensory modalities. Lecturing, by itself, is not very effective. Lecturing combined with presentation of visual material is much more effective. If you have PowerPoint slide presentations available, that's great! If you don't have slides available, prepare a sheet of chart paper ahead of time with the major topical points listed. This will help to keep you organized and on track and it will help the learners to assimilate and retain your major points.
3. Reduce the apparent complexity of new material so that learners feel empowered rather than overwhelmed. If the task involves several steps, give the learners the first step, make sure they have completed that step, give the second step, monitor completion, and so on until all of the steps have been completed. This will keep the learners from becoming confused about what it is they are supposed to accomplish. It will also avoid the problem of faster students finishing the activity twenty minutes before the slower students are finished. Most importantly, learners will be more likely to experience success and will therefore be empowered to go on to the next learning challenge.
4. Co-facilitation is a collaborative activity, not a competitive one. We all know how frustrating it is to try to teach when the learners are engaging in private conversations with one-another. It is absolutely

inexcusable for the side conversations to be involving a facilitator. It may be that a learner has asked you a perfectly relevant question but discussing it while your partner is trying to get the job done is not the right way to address the needs of that one learner. If you judge the learner's question to be of general interest, deal with it as a group issue. If you judge the question to be of relevance to that learner only, delay discussing it with the learner until your partner has finished.

5. Meet the needs of learners for autonomous, self-directed, relevancy-oriented learning experiences. When learners ask for rationale behind a practice, it is not appropriate to simply tell them they don't have to know why a practice exists, they just have to know how to comply with the practice. Many learners find it very difficult to retain isolated pieces of information unless they understand the rationale for the information. This understanding enables them to relate the isolated fact to other facts in a way that greatly helps assimilation and retention. This is particularly true of the "abstract conceptualization" learning style. Remember, a classroom will contain learners with a variety of learning styles. Not everyone learns the same way you do.

6. Handling disruptive learners is an important and very difficult challenge for instructors. Delivering clever put-downs is not the way to control disruptive learners. It seems that every class has at least one "difficult" participant. These people may feel a need to dominate the class to prove they are the smartest or quickest. They may have a need to appear to be the class comedian. They may be incredibly negative about the organization and cynical about training efforts. Regardless of the form of dysfunction encountered, the job of the facilitator is to assist all learners to derive the maximum benefit from the training. If the dysfunctional participant needs to receive pointed feedback, that feedback should always be delivered in private.

7. Learning is most effective when the instructor and the learners partner in an environment of mutual respect and support. By the time the learners appear in the classroom, they have picked up a considerable amount of knowledge about the organization and about their new jobs. They are far from being competent, much less expert, in their jobs but it is important to acknowledge the wisdom they have already acquired. This sort of acknowledgement and encouragement empowers the learning process and makes your job as an instructor much more enjoyable.

8. Putting job complexity into perspective. Convincing the learners that their jobs are incredibly complex and that they won't be fully capable for a couple of years undermines the learning process. New employees tend to feel overwhelmed by complex jobs. The job of the Veterans Service Representative is certainly complex. It is so complex that the VSR probably won't be fully capable for a couple of years. The

point is that when people feel overwhelmed they need to be encouraged, not discouraged. They need to be reminded of how much they have accomplished in such a short time. They don't need to be reminded of how incompetent they are. Once again, this sort of encouragement empowers learning.

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF A GOOD FACILITATOR

An effective facilitator:

- listens and observes
- Uses visual aids effectively (overheads, flipchart, etc.)
- records ideas legibly
- asks probing questions
- thinks quickly
- acknowledges and responds to emotions
- paraphrases
- summarizes
- resolves conflict
- uses humor
- knows a variety of techniques for group discussions, including problem-solving and decision-making
- designs or chooses appropriate group discussion techniques
- understands people and groups, and
- Energizes the group.

VALUES AND ATTITUDES OF A GOOD FACILITATOR

An effective facilitator must also hold certain values and attitudes. To be most productive, the group must share these same values. Demonstrate the following values and attitudes yourself, and you will help foster them in the group you work with:

- **Respect and Empathy**
All ideas are important. No idea or individual is more important than another.

- **Cooperation**
Your group members must work together to reach the group's goals. As a facilitator you cannot force individuals to work together but you can create an environment for it to happen.
- **Honesty**
You and the group need to be honest and open about your feelings, values and priorities.
- **Responsibility**
The group must assume responsibility for the solutions and their implications. The facilitator assumes responsibility for his or her actions, which ultimately affect the content, participation and process of the session.
- **Flexibility**
As you manage the discussion, you will be sensitive to the needs of individuals and adjust the process and schedule as required.

MISCELLANEOUS TIPS

Personal Attributes

Smile - You don't have to grin all the time but the occasional smile will help put the learners at ease.

Practice your presentation - The more you are on-top of your presentation, the better you will be at paying attention to your learners instead of your own insecurities.

Don't hide behind a podium. Move around in front of the class and, at the same time, avoid pacing back and forth. When you move, move slowly.

It you can't keep from playing with keys and coins in your pocket, empty your pockets before instructing.

Watch out for the jokes. There are very few jokes that can be told in the classroom without offending someone. Be careful!

Show your appreciation to your learners. Find things to congratulate them on. Enhancing self-esteem enhances the learning environment.

Maintain eye contact with all of the learners. Three seconds of eye contact is a pretty good rule of thumb. More than that without a break in the contact may feel uncomfortable.

Using Instructional Aids

Have key flip-charts prepared ahead of time so that you can minimize your writing time and maximize learner eye contact.

When using flip-charts, write in two-inch letters and don't crowd the words.

Use multiple colors to organize the information on your flip-charts.

Ask the learners in the back of the room whether your writing is legible from where they are sitting.

Avoid writing and talking at the same time. When you are writing your audience is behind you and they will have difficulty hearing your words.

Develop and use handouts so that learners will have information available for later use. You really don't want learners writing frantically to capture your words. You want them to think about what you are saying and to participate in discussion.

If handouts are to be put in binders, make sure they are punched for that purpose.

Respecting the Learners

Be enthusiastic. Boredom is a contagious disease. If you are infected with it, the learners will soon catch your disease.

Prepare for instructing. If you expect learners to be prepared to learn, you must be prepared to teach.

Present the material at a pace that is consistent with the ability of the learners to assimilate it. You can go quickly because you understand the material. They must go slowly because they don't understand it.

Allow for individual differences in learning styles. The person who is "getting it" more slowly may be as bright and motivated as the next person but with a different learning style.

Under no circumstances is it appropriate to resort to sarcasm or ridicule.

Start, stop, and take breaks when you say you will.

Help the learners succeed at tasks by making certain your directions are clear and broken down into simple steps. Monitor the process to help re-direct if learners stray from the path.

Asking and Answering Questions

Use both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The closed question has one correct answer while the open question has more possibilities and will prompt more thought and follow-up discussion. Each is appropriate in its own way.

Understand that every question is asked to facilitate the learning of the person asking the question and therefore is a legitimate part of the learning process.

Be honest in responding to question. If you don't know the answer, then say so.

After answering a question, check to make sure it addresses the issue that was in the learner's mind.

Allow for silence after asking a question. Too often, instructors wait five seconds and then answer their own question. Give the learners time to consider their answers.

If someone answers a question incorrectly, try to find something about that response that is praiseworthy before moving toward a correct answer.

SUMMARY

Facilitating is a challenging yet rewarding experience. It challenges us in the sense that it involves a complex mixture of knowledge, skills, attitudes and intuition. The knowledge can be developed by reading material such as this. The skills can be developed by effective practice. The attitudes will be developed once you believe in what you are doing. And the intuition will grow with each facilitation experience.

Group work is fascinating because groups are made up of people. All people are different from each other, and each responds differently to life. Therefore, each group discussion will be different than every other. Your job as a facilitator is to appreciate and understand these differences to help individuals express themselves.

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