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Designing the workshop experience

When designing the workshop experience it is worthwhile being conscious of the following aspects.

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The workshop participant as adult learner

IB workshops are attended by teachers and administrators who are experienced professionals with extensive backgrounds in educational practice. They are knowledgeable and capable adult learners.

To design effective learning experiences for workshop participants, it is important to understand the nature of the adult learner. The following list of common characteristics has been compiled.

- 1. Adults are autonomous, self-directed learners.** They are mature people and expect to be treated as such. Adults learn best when they collaborate as active participants in the learning process and are involved in determining how and what they will learn. They are self-reliant and prefer to learn at their own pace. The adult learner controls what is learned, selecting new information and/or deciding how to use it at both the conscious and unconscious levels.
- 2. Adults are goal oriented.** They usually have a set goal that they want to attain and therefore appreciate a workshop design that has clearly defined elements. They will not be tolerant of work that does not have immediate and direct application to the stated objectives.
- 3. 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. This means that the objectives of the work or exercise must be clearly defined before the course or workshop begins and must also relate to a situation or setting important to the participants.
- 4. Adults are practical and problem centred.** They tend to be impatient with theory unless it is applied to practical problems in their real world. Their learning is not complete unless it is expressed in an appropriate action.
- 5. Adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge** that they bring to the workshop situation. These include work-related activities, family responsibilities, interests, competencies and previous education. All of these past experiences, both personal and professional, affect what the adult learns and are the foundation for current learning. Adults are likely to have acquired knowledge and developed habits that interfere with new learning.
- 6. Adults learn through reflection on their own and others' experience.** Adults enjoy and

learn readily in socially compatible situations. They learn better if given time to reflect on and process learning activities.

7. Adult learners' stages of development affect their learning. Whether personal (cognitive, moral, ego, conceptual), chronological (early adulthood, mid-life, etc) or professional (new or experienced teacher), an individual's stage of development profoundly affects his/her learning.

8. Adults have competing interests: the realities of their lives. Typically, adults' motivations for learning are different to those of children. They may be attending a workshop to meet external expectations (perhaps sent by a supervisory officer), as a requirement for professional advancement, to develop a social or professional network or out of pure intellectual interest. Similarly, adults' barriers to learning are different to those of children. These may include a lack of energy, time and/or money, problems with childcare, conflicting schedules, insufficient confidence, and being pressured to learn when really not interested or ready.

9. Adults exhibit a variety of individual learning styles. They learn in different ways at different times and for varying reasons. However, most individuals have developed a dominant learning style and, by adulthood, have come to know what it is.

10. Adults learn better in comfortable, non-threatening environments of trust and mutual respect. They need to feel comfortable physically and psychologically. They learn best in a climate that minimizes anxiety and encourages freedom to experiment. Learning involves change, and supporting and encouraging learning does not necessarily mean that the environment should be free of conflict. It is the manner in which it is handled that challenges learners to acquire new perspectives and supports them in their efforts to do so.

Implications for workshop design

An understanding of the principles of adult learning and the nature of adult learners is important in order to design effective and suitable learning experiences for IB workshop participants.

IB teachers and administrators are experienced learners and teaching professionals with a multitude of experiences in both national and international schools. The variety of experiences that these adults bring to the workshop situation will affect what and how they will learn.

The following recommendations for practice reflect adult education principles and the nature of adult learners. They are based on information found in several sources listed at the end of this section.

1. Adult learners are autonomous, self-directed learners.

Workshop leaders must actively involve participants in the learning process and serve as partners and facilitators, guiding participants to develop their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts. Participants should actively influence the learning approach.

- Build options into your plan so you can make changes if required.
- Share your agenda and assumptions and provide opportunity for input.
- Build your plans around the participants' needs and compare goals.
- Move towards increasing participants' responsibility.
- Plan participatory activities for everyone but make allowance for individual choice. Match the degree of choice to the participants' level of development.
- Suggest follow-up ideas and next steps for after the session.

2. Adults are goal oriented.

- Show participants how this workshop will help them to attain their goals and objectives.
- Present ideas and concepts in a logical manner.
- Provide good signposts about the structure and direction of the session.
- Highlight principles and key ideas so they stand out from the details.
- Provide a quality, well-organized experience that uses time effectively.
- Communicate benefits frequently.

3. Adults are relevancy oriented.

- Identify objectives for participants before the course begins.
- Be sensitive and responsive to the emerging needs of the group.
- Customize and individualize where possible.
- Relate theories and concepts to the participants' daily world.
- Plan opportunities for the application of new concepts.
- Develop and/or use instructional materials that are based on and reflect the context of the participants' real lives and experiences.

4. Adults are practical and problem centred.

- Model the relevant IB programme whenever possible and point this out to the participants.
- Give overviews, summaries and examples.
- Structure the content and materials to meet their assessed needs.
- Relate learning to participants' real world examples and stories.
- Plan for direct application of the new information.
- Design collaborative, problem-solving activities.
- Anticipate problems in applying the new ideas; offer suggested uses.

5. Adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge.

- Provide opportunities for participants to share their knowledge and experience as a resource for all.
- Ask for feedback and provide input opportunities on the work and ideas.
- Create activities that use and build on their experience and knowledge.
- Plan to build success in increments.
- Relate new ideas to familiar concepts by comparisons (analogies).
- Emphasize new ideas as better than, not different from, the old.
- Plan alternative activities so you can adjust to fit the participants' level of experience.
- Avoid educational jargon and do not "talk down" to participants.
- Promote the participants' self-esteem.

6. Adults learn through reflection on their own and others' experience.

- Foster a spirit of cooperation in the setting.
- Encourage social interaction through seating arrangements, small group activities, assignment of roles, case studies, etc.
- Provide a variety of opportunities for each person to share, teach and learn.
- Allow plenty of time to reflect on and process the learning activity.

7. Adult learners' stages of development affect their learning.

Try to ascertain as much information as possible about the participants in order to assess their

needs and plan accordingly.

- Personal: cultural background, gender, preferred learning style, languages spoken/fluency, expectations for workshop, learning objectives.
- Chronological: age, cultural history.
- Professional: current position and level of experience, professional background, immediate career aim.

Use the information above to:

- develop a participant profile
- assess participants' needs and expectations
- compare these to stated goals and objectives of the workshop
- assess resources (staff, materials, facilities) and skills
- plan the workshop and facilities.

8. Adults have competing interests: the realities of their lives.

For learners to be fully engaged in learning their attention must be fully focused on the activity and/or the material being presented. As much as possible, barriers to learning should be identified and, if possible, removed or kept to a minimum.

To help learners become motivated, the following techniques may be helpful.

- Capture attention by stimulating an attitude of inquiry.
- Create an environment that is collegial, honest and enthusiastic.
- Make the learning relevant; point out benefits and links.
- Build confidence and the expectation of success.
- Encourage enjoyment of the learning experience.
- Provide a stimulating atmosphere that appeals to all senses.
- Use visual stimuli whenever possible to get your point across.
- Appeal to several senses at the same time for greatest effect.
- Vary the stimuli.
- Plan a variety of different opportunities for participants to share, interact and become involved.
- Reinforce learning by providing useful feedback.

9. Adults exhibit a variety of individual learning styles.

When the presenting style matches the learning style, there is likely to be a significant increase in a participant's motivation.

- Consider the research regarding learning styles.
- Plan a wide range of methodologies, activities and technologies to address learning styles and abilities.
- Plan your opening to create interest and focus.
- Get to know your audience.
- Plan for appropriate transitions between activities.
- Be sensitive and open to emerging needs and make changes to accommodate these.

10. Adults learn better in comfortable, non-threatening environments of trust and mutual respect.

- Encourage participants to get acquainted and create interpersonal bonds.
- Plan opportunities for participants to share experiences and voice opinions.
- Build a safe climate for risk-taking.
- Provide low-risk activities in small-group settings.
- Plan to build success in stages.
- Handle conflict in a way that challenges learners to acquire new perspectives and supports them in the process.
- Show empathy and sensitivity for the learning process.
- Help participants become more effective and competent.
- Look after the participants' physical comforts (creative use of the facility, appropriate fresh air, coffee and rest breaks, etc).

The workshop leader as facilitator

Encouraging self-direction and creating a climate of trust, mutual respect and collaboration are founded on the relatively new idea that the roles of teachers and learners can be interchangeable. In such a scenario, the workshop leader can be a facilitator, still having overall responsibility for the learning activity but, as a member of the learning group, he/she can also be a person with something to learn as well as to teach.

The multicultural mix of workshop leaders, teachers and administrators attending regional workshops is a rather unique feature of the IBO. Not only are there differences in age, gender and experience, but the political, cultural and educational theories and experiences of workshop participants are also often diverse. The participants may all be educators, but their range of formal knowledge, skills and experiences can be very broad.

Participants with cultural and educational experiences similar to those of the workshop leader, including good fluency in the language of the workshop and some familiarity with adult-learning practices, may need minimal encouragement and support in the collaborative-learning setting.

Participants from "traditional" educational settings and traditionally unequal teacher-learner relationships may not be prepared for the collaborative nature of the adult-learning environment and could find it unsettling and a cause for anxiety. This type of participant may need special encouragement and additional time to become self-directed and comfortable with the variety of roles within the collaborative group setting.

It is important therefore to understand that the nature and number of participants will, to a great extent, govern the degree to which the workshop can be an inclusive and truly collaborative model of adult learning.

Key references

Cross, Patricia K. 1981. *Adults as Learners: Increasing Participation and Facilitating Learning*. San Francisco USA: Jossey-Bass.

- Cross suggests a CAL - characteristics of adults as learners - model as a framework to accommodate current knowledge of what is known about adults as learners. A summary of Cross's CAL model can be found at <http://www.hfni.gsehd.gwu.edu/~tip/cross.html>.

Fardouly, Niki. 1998. *Principles of Instructional Design and Adult Learning: How Students Learn*. Australia: University of New South Wales.

- <http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/learning/instructionaldesign/studentslearn.htm>

Hinds, Nancy and Pedrini, Lisa. 1996. *Workshop on workshops: A training document for workshop facilitators*. Vancouver: British Columbia Teachers' Federation.

- Easy to read and full of practical ideas and strategies for workshop design and facilitation.

Knowles, Malcolm Shepherd. 1980. *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. 2nd ed. Wilton, Connecticut: Association Press.

- A revised version of the original classic on adult-learning theory. A summary of Malcolm Knowles's theory of andragogy can be found at <http://www.hfni.gsehd.gwu.edu/~tip/knowles.html>.

Zemke, R and Zemke, S. July 1998. "30 things we know for sure about adult learning". *Training* 25: 7 pp57-61.

- An excellent resource, this article highlights things we know about adult learners and their motivation, about designing curriculums for adults, and about working with adults in the classroom. An online version can be found at <http://www.floridatechnet.org/opcollege/gettingstarted/thirtythings.pdf>.

Additional reading

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Joyce, B and Showers, B. February 1980. "Improving In-service Training: The messages of research". *Educational Leadership*. 37:5 pp379-385.

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Sparks, GM. November 1983. "Synthesis of research on staff development for effective teaching". *Educational Leadership*. 41:3 pp65-72.

Tough, Allen. 1979. *The Adult's Learning Projects: A Fresh Approach to Theory and Practice in Adult Learning*. Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

- An examination of how adults deliberately engage in self-directed learning projects throughout their lives, with recommendations for how this type of natural activity can be adapted to formal learning settings.

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