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The Learning Climate: Organization, Flow, and Dynamics

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Section A

The Training Environment

Successful training depends on the environment in which it occurs

This includes

- *The social environment*
- *The physical environment*
- *The emotional environment*



Most health care trainees are adults

- *They respond best to an atmosphere of acceptance, respect, and encouragement*



Trainees should feel free to ask questions and contribute to group discussion

- *They will not do so if the trainer humiliates them or makes them look foolish in front of their fellow trainees*
- *Nor will they be at ease if the trainer shows favoritism towards some group members*

Creating an atmosphere where individuals feel able to work, learn and contribute depends on the trainer developing an attitude of respect for his/her trainees

This attitude will be taken up by the trainees, who will learn to respect each other

Use self-disclosure and humor to develop an open climate

Having respect for the trainees is essential, but the trainers can also arrange matters so that the social relationships can actually develop

At the beginning of a course, time should be spent in letting the trainees get to know each other and the trainers

Trainees should be involved in activity in the first five minutes of the program

Parties

Birthdays

Certainly there should be a lot of sessions in which the trainees and trainers will discuss and will solve problems as a team



Adequate break periods also afford trainees a chance to get to know each other

This pattern will allow the social relationships to develop

Starting a course with a full timetable of lectures will almost certainly prevent the development of very important group relationships and confidence

The physical surroundings can also affect learning

The basic principle is that learning takes place best where there are not distractions

The physical environment should be quiet and at a comfortable temperature

Poor ventilation or overcrowding will decrease the rate of learning

An ideal room for a group of 20–25 trainees should have a floor area of 60–80 m² and be approximately square

There should be good ventilation and light from the windows

There should be some form of chalkboard, flipchart stand, and ideally a screen for a projector

If there is a projector, there should be means for darkening the room without stopping ventilation



Ideally, it should be possible to control the temperature, but in any case the temperature should be reasonably comfortable for the trainees

The furniture should include moveable desks and chairs so that the participants can:

- *Face each other during discussion or*
- *Face the screen/chalkboard when material is presented there*

Depending on the facility,
it is good to vary the
location of sessions

- *Including use of
outdoor spaces
when weather
permits*



Breakout or small group activities need their own spaces

- *These should be spread out enough so that groups do not disturb each other*
- *Not too dispersed to make it difficult for the trainers to circulate among the groups*



Set up a secretariat that can accommodate trainers' meetings and workspace

Make it accessible to trainees

- *They may need assistance in collecting per diem, making return transportation arrangements, etc.*

Ensure all materials, supplies, and equipment are stocked in the secretariat

Space, Time, and Supplies for Personal Needs

For break periods, there should be adequate space to walk around

Toilets and drinking water should be easily accessible

Formal breaks with snacks and refreshments are appreciated but depend on your budget

Breaks should be timed to:

- *Prevent tiredness and boredom*
- *Be long enough to refresh the participants, but not so long that they get “lost”*



Move! No one can be engaged and productive after sitting still for hours

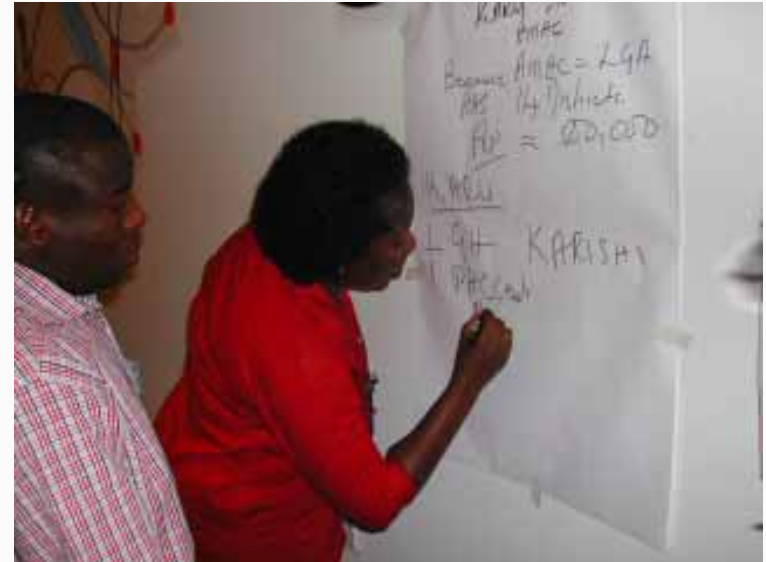
Learn to "read" the group

- *Watch for fidgeting, frequent individual trips to the bathroom, coffee breaks, silence, sleepiness, tension, nervous laughter, eye-rolling, talk dominated by a few, whispering and side conversations*
- *All these reactions mean something*

Reinforcement, or reward for appropriate response, is possibly the oldest and the most well-founded principle of learning in animals and humans

Training designers should be continuously conscious of this principle and should look for times, places, and situations in which effective positive reinforcements can be applied

As Jung stated: "It can be critical that the individual recognize reward for changing. If the individual is not able to identify the positive effects resulting from his changes, he may revert to earlier behaviors, assuming his efforts have been irrelevant."



Specific experiences and the training event as a whole should be seen by the trainee as beneficial, worthwhile, and to some extent enjoyable

- *Trainees need to “feel good” about it so that they will further their training and encourage others to undertake similar training*
- *This is intrinsic reinforcement, reward*

Tangible but inexpensive material or extrinsic rewards include

- *Diplomas*
- *Attendance prizes*
- *Conference bags*



Ask trainers, training committee members:

- *Do content matters and training methods challenge the trainee enough without being too threatening?*



This is known as **effective level of risk**

- *Sensitive **subjects** such as sexuality and **methods** such as role play or sharing personal experiences may make some participants feel uncomfortable if not introduced with care*
- *Confidentiality is important*



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Section B

Organization and Flow of Sessions

This section addresses:

- *Getting started*
- *Sequencing*
- *Timing*
- *Redundancy*
- *Flexibility*
- *Wrapping up*

Trainers and staff need to meet prior to the session to:

- *Review the upcoming session*
- *Clarify roles and responsibilities*
- *Arrange space*
- *Organize materials and equipment*
- *Revise schedule as needed*



We have talked about the need to start the process on the right foot

We also need to start each session in a way that attracts people's attention and involves them

Provide an overview of objectives, procedures and

- *Seek input on expectations and needs*

Ensure that both trainees and trainers have the materials they need to conduct the session

An important aspect of structuring a training program is *sequencing*

- *The arrangement of individual activities in a step-by-step series*
- *Which logically leads to the program's goal*

This sort of structuring may facilitate flexibility

- *We can skip steps when it seems appropriate and still be aware of where we are*
- *We can rearrange the order of events while still keeping track of what has not been covered*

FLOW

Does the content of one activity provide the basis of background for the next activity(ies)?

Is there continuity?



Build interest and introduce new content before you delve more deeply

Set the stage for learning using an activity that hooks participant's interest or gives the big picture



Place easy activities before demanding activities

- *Get participants settled and warmed up before you put them through hard work*

Maintain a good mix of activities

- *Vary training methods, the length of activities, the intensity of activities, the physical setting, and the format*
- *Variety is the spice of good training*

Group together concepts and skills that build on each other

- *We learn better when one idea is an outgrowth of another*

Provide sub-skills before practicing complex skills

- *It is better to learn the parts before the whole*

Close training sequences with a discussion of “so what” and “now what”

- *Have the participants consider the implications of the course content for themselves and plan their next steps back on the job*

Unless you have run a particular training program in the past, your estimates of time for sessions and activities may be mainly an educated guess

- *Training of trainers and practice sessions will help give more realistic estimates*

But when you do set the schedule, try to keep to time and communicate this as a group norm

Can the stated objectives be met within the allotted time?

Do not pack activities too tightly: allow extra time to tie up loose ends or clarify issues

Is there flexibility in the schedule to add extra items to meet trainees' interests or review topics that were not grasped well initially?

Participatory learning activities will likely require more time than didactic ones

Time is needed for discussion and “debriefing” after most activities to find out what trainees learned and thought of the session

- *This is a time to integrate experiences*

All trainers and guest speakers need to know their time limits and be held to those

How to Avoid Wasting Time

Start sessions, especially those after lunch or breaks, at the stated time, even if everyone is not there

Give clear instructions, possibly reinforced by a handout, to avoid confusion

Prepare lecture, discussion, and review points in advance on a flipchart or slide—not as you go along

Distribute handouts in advance; have a handout table where people can collect materials during breaks

Have subgroup reports posted on flipchart paper to avoid lengthy presentations and repetition

While ensuring wide participation in discussions, don't let them drag

Any effective communication has a great deal of redundancy built into it, and this principle applies doubly to a complex communication activity such as a training program

Never assume that a message will be heard and learned in a presentation

Important points should be made **again** via different media in different contexts

If the message is important, trainees should

- ***Hear it***
- ***Read it***
- ***Watch it***
- ***Recite it***
- ***Do it***

Summarization is one obvious and important way to apply the redundancy principle

A common rule of speech-making: “say what you are going to say, say it, and then say what you have said”

Trainees should be given previews of what they are about to experience; and later reminded and encouraged to recall what they learned as it becomes relevant

Being flexible is partly a response to monitoring, which is discussed in the next lecture

Flexibility is something that needs to be built into the training plan

One should plan to elicit information on trainee experiences and interests and then:

- *Use trainees as trainers to share their experiences*
- *Address some needs and interests not in the original plan*

Taking Advantage of Opportunities

In addition to bringing trainee experiences to the learning environment

- *Keep aware of other educational opportunities such as a timely TV show or presence of an expert in town*



Recognize too, that back-up plans are part of flexibility

- *You may need to identify alternative speakers*
- *Have other activities that substitute for a field trip if the weather changes*

There needs to be a clear sense of closure to each session

This is a time to review briefly with participants

- *What they have learned (or not)*
- *What was confusing or inadequate*
- *What about the environment was uncomfortable*
- *What to expect in upcoming sessions*



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Section C

Group Dynamics

This section addresses the following issues

- *Establishing group norms*
- *Leadership style*
 - Facilitating participation
- *Enforcing group norms*
 - Including problem solving
- *Forging group identity*
 - Valuable also for follow-up

During training, people usually must interact for learning to occur

Therefore, ask yourself:

- *Are there good, cordial relationships and interactions among the trainees and between trainees and trainers?*
- *Do participants share ideas among themselves or only talk directly to the trainer?*

Does the trainer act like a boss or a facilitator?

How do trainers handle and trainees respond to sensitive topics such as human sexuality?

What can be done to improve relationships?



In the very beginning of a training program, it is necessary to establish group norms

These facilitate smooth flow

Norms can address issues such as

- *Being on time*
- *Participating in activities*
- *Paying attention, not interrupting*
- *Helping out with management tasks*

Trainees should participate actively in discussing and suggesting norms

People will more likely comply with norms that they suggest and agree upon

Norms can be written on flipchart paper and posted as a reminder



Participation should be a norm

When trainees cluster in subgroups, they should be encouraged to rotate through various group task roles such as chairman, observer, recorder, summarizer, etc.

Other well known involvement techniques include role playing and simulation

Use of space influences involvement and interaction

A “typical” classroom setting discourages interaction among participants



This may be useful only for brief lecture and guest speaker times

In adult education settings, the trainer is a facilitator, not an instructor

At the same time, the trainer may be an arbitrator and decision maker of final resort

A good leader in a training program gets others—the trainees—to take responsibility for learning and doing

Recognizing problems

- *As noted, trainers should keep an eye out for attention and participation levels and problems*
- *Rebellion against a leader, no matter how democratic s/he tries to be, is normal as a group develops its identity over time*

Try to find out whether this is a result of normal desires for independence and growth or

It may be symptomatic of a greater dissatisfaction or discomfort with the training content and methods



Problem Behaviors in Groups

Someone monopolizes discussion

A participant goes off on a tangent

Private conversations are occurring

Someone makes disruptive or inappropriate jokes



Someone is disagreeing to the point of being argumentative

A participant is reading the newspaper, working on something unrelated

In contrast to disruptive behavior

- *Someone may sit quietly and not get involved*
- *Another participant may fall asleep*

Personal quirks such as tapping pencils, eating, or shuffling papers may distract others

Some trainees may be chronically late



Avoid being the policeman unless there is an urgent problem

Involve the group in addressing its norms or updating and revising norms

Stop the session and refer the group to the norms posted on the wall

Ask people to talk about the problems and offer solutions

Serve as a mediator

Part of the training should take place in pairs, trios, and quartets

Giving the trainers and trainees multiple opportunities for interpersonal contact, sharing, mutual help, and role identity development



Photo by Kabiru Salami

Close working relationships among trainees not only reinforce learning, they also build a sense of common fate, a shared identity around the new concept of “self-as-change-agent”

- *This can be carried back to the work environment, providing trainees a “support” group for implementing change*