Listening to Learners

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Training sessions for adult volunteers almost always have some participants who think the workshop is wonderful and others who are less enthusiastic. It seems as if trainers "can't please all the people all the time."

This study examines the comments of individuals who evaluated a workshop as less than perfect. The aim of the study is to understand the qualities or characteristics of workshop instruction that interfere with the volunteer's ability to learn. The ultimate goal is to determine strategies to improve the design of workshops for volunteers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A management and training company provided evaluation forms from 17 workshops conducted over an eight-month period in the late 1980s. Workshops were conducted throughout the Western United States and included a cross-section of men and women from college age to senior citizens. The workshop topics included such things as Recruiting Volunteers, Customer Relations, and Public Relations. There were 383 evaluation forms for analysis. Table I reports the responses.

Table I: Respondent Comments Related to "Ratings" of the Workshop

Ratings	Number	Percentage
Very Helpful	236	66.8%
Somewhat Helpful	109	30.6%
Not Very Helpful	9	2.5%
Useless	0	0
No Response	29	

There were 118 ratings of "less than helpful." Four questions gave the respondents the opportunity to provide further information evaluating the workshop.

The researchers evaluated comments made in answer to these questions:

a. What things did you find most useful in this workshop?
b. What did you find least helpful in this workshop?
c. What improvement would you suggest in this workshop?
d. Any other comments you would like to share?

The 118 respondents offered 185 comments that suggested changes in the workshop to enhance their learning. Those comments became the basis of analysis for this study.

Some comments related to process, such as the teaching techniques used or method of facilitation. Other comments related to content, dealing with the subject being taught. Comments were categorized by process or content. Of the 185 comments, 15% (27) related to content and 85% related to process. Tables II and III provide a more detailed analysis of the 185 comments.

Table II: Respondent Comments Related to "Content" of the Workshop

Comments	Number	Percentage
Specificity, relevance	17	63%
Scope	7	26%
Topic itself	3	11%

Table III: Respondent Comments Related to "Process" of the Workshop

Comments	Number	Percentage
Time	66	41.7%
Choice of Activities	60	37.9%
Physical Activities	13	8.2%
Level of Interaction	7	4.4%
Instructions	7	4.4%
Selection of Group Participants	5	3.1%

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Most "content" comments related to the workshop's specificity, scope of coverage or discussion, and relevance to a given setting, such as the work place. "Process" comments suggested new directions: "more time," "less time," "more of a mix or participants in small groups." Most comments related to "process" identified particular elements of workshop design to improve. They often suggested a change in direction to enhance learning.

DISCUSSION

Respondents put an emphasis on time, specificity or relevance, and choice of activity by the trainers. It seems the participants held clear expectations for the workshop given their work setting, and viewed each activity as an alternative use of their time to pursue those expectations.

These adult learners noted the use of time in 41% of the "process" comments. They disliked being rushed through an activity or through the workshop. Activities not fully explained as to applicability were often criticized for taking too much time. Note was often made about the time of day or night, indicating that late hours are not conducive to learning. Several respondents asked for more time on the topic.

Another key issue for the respondents was the type of activity selected. Individuals expressed the need to discuss real life problems. Suggestions ranged from having the instructor lecture more to keeping small group discussions on tasks as assigned.

Several respondents did not want so much group interaction, but more from the instructor. Others shied away from the interaction of role playing. The proportion of comments in this category is congruent with current research on learning styles which indicates approximately 12% of adult learners do not feel they gain from interactive learning processes.

Some respondents suggested that activities could have been adapted to enhance learning. Suggestions included such

things as, "use more time," or "use less time," "use different questions," or "develop a new format, such as a handout."

The mix of people in small groups was an area of concern. Some respondents say there is a need to "mix-up" the audience more than once during the training. Following an adult education theory that most adults seek assistance from others in their learning, it follows that the higher the number of participants providing meaningful interaction the greater the potential for learning.

Responses that referred to scope and specificity in the learning environment were generally directed at instructions and explanations prior to an activity. The need to relate learning to back-home situations was mentioned frequently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Dennis Prisk says, ". . . a successful training program depends most of all on a jealous use of time." This study of 118 adult learners supports that opinion and offers direction for volunteer administrators who plan and conduct workshops.

1. Volunteers want a pattern of learning activities where they can take charge of solving issues important to them. Effective trainers provide an environment where learners take responsibility for content and applying it to their volunteer job. Budgeting the use of time in the workshop is a key.
2. By reducing the scope of the content the trainer can connect the content to each volunteer's experience and situation.
3. Teaching techniques or methods that offer an array of capsules with material available for individual follow-up seem to be the most effective.
4. Clear instructions and explanations about each activity are essential. It is at the time of "giving directions" the trainer can relate the activity to learning objectives and the effective use of time. Volunteers want to know their

time will be well used. An agenda with time estimates is essential.

5. The volunteer administrator needs always to remember that the participants hold in their mind during the workshop that this is an alternate use of their time. This also applies to their evaluation of the different activities within the workshop.

In most training sessions with volunteers there will be a minority who are not enthusiastic learners. Attention to how the topic is related to the job the volunteer will do, and attention to the use of time, seem two critical elements that influence learning. The process of learning is so important to adults that they are quick to recognize when it interferes with their grasping the required content. Changes, like those suggested from this study, can and will increase the potential for learning for a greater number of volunteers.

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REFERENCES

Prisk, D.P. (1977). "Conferencing as on Adult hearning Activity." *Adult Leadership.*