



Twelve Tips for Conducting Effective Workshops

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Workshops are a common educational format for transmitting information and promoting skill acquisition. However, they frequently fall short of their teaching potential. Many workshops do not seem like workshops at all. Participants are often quiet, passive onlookers; the workshop coordinator gives a 'lecture' to the group; and questions and discussion are frequently absent.

A workshop has been defined as: A usually brief, intensive educational program for a relatively small group of people in a given field that emphasizes *participation* in problem solving efforts...(Webster, 1977)

And yet, it is the latter—active participation with an emphasis on problem solving—that is often lacking. Why is this? What can be done to make workshops more effective? Although numerous articles describe workshops as a common method of teaching adults, fewer offer specific directions on how to make this teaching format more productive. The goal of this article is to offer a number of suggestions which may help to make workshops more effective—and more fun.

Pre-workshop planning

The content and process of educational activities are frequently the result of events characterized by chance rather than careful, logical planning. (Knopke & Diekelman, 1981) However, one of the main ingredients of a successful workshop is thorough planning. Do not leave your workshop to chance!

Tip 1 Define your objectives for the teaching session.

In planning your workshop, decide what you are trying to achieve and why it is important for you to do so. For example, do you intend to transmit new information or promote skill acquisition? Are you trying to facilitate attitude or behavior change? As Douglas and his colleagues (1988) have stated, workshops are often designed to develop a skill on the part of the learner. It may be a diagnostic skill, such as the evaluation of patients with unique symptoms; it may be a psychomotor skill, such as flexible sigmoidoscopy; it may be a teaching skill, such as giving feedback; or it may be a research skill, such as designing a research project.

Determine your goals carefully, for they will inevitably influence your choice of teaching method, the sequence of proposed learning activities, and the evaluation strategy.



Tip 2 Find out who your audience will be.

Whenever possible, try to determine who the participants will be. What is their knowledge of the topic? What is their previous experience with this subject matter? What are their needs and expectations? For example, if you are giving a workshop on 'feedback', you would want to know whether this term is familiar to your audience. You would also want to inquire whether your audience consists of newer teachers, first beginning to think about this concept, or experienced faculty, who have already been to numerous introductory workshops on the topic and now want to refine their skills.

Although it is not always possible to meet your participants prior to the actual workshop, it is possible to obtain relevant and helpful information from the Course Coordinator.

Tip 3 Determine your teaching method and design the appropriate workshop activities.

Once the objectives of the teaching session are clarified, decide whether a workshop format is appropriate. If it is, choose the teaching method that will best meet your overall goals.

A number of methods can be used to involve a group in active learning. These include case discussions, role plays and simulations, videotape reviews, live demonstrations, and opportunities for practising specific skills. Workshops should encourage problem-solving and/or skill acquisition. The choice of teaching methods should, therefore, reflect this bias.

The final content and format of the workshop will also be influenced by the subject matter, your teaching goals, and the learners' past experiences with the topic. These variables will also help define your method of evaluation—an important component of any workshop.

The Workshop itself

Flexibility is one of the key ingredients of a successful workshop. As important as it is to plan ahead, it is even more important to be prepared to abandon your prepared agenda!

Tip 4 Introduce the group members to you and to each other.

Once the workshop is underway, it is essential to determine who is in your audience. If you are working with a small group, you might want to go around the room and ask the group members to *briefly* introduce themselves and to state their expectations of the session. (The emphasis on brevity is important; otherwise your introduction can take up most of your available time.) In a larger group, you might ask the group members to introduce themselves by a show of hands. For example, how many of you are doctors? How many of you have been to workshops on this topic before? How many of you teach medical students or residents?



Knowledge of your participants will help you target your material appropriately. Few people like to be patronized. Yet rarely does anyone want to listen to material that is too sophisticated. Finding out who is in your audience will help you strike the appropriate balance and meet the group's needs and expectations.

Tip 5 Outline your objectives for the teaching session.

Tell the group what you hope to accomplish in the available time. Specify what you will and will not do. Try to match your objectives to the participants' needs. Outline the schedule of events so that the group members will know what to expect. Feedback on the proposed agenda is helpful in ensuring consensus between your suggested plan and the group's needs.

Tip 6 Create a relaxed atmosphere for learning.

The introduction of group members to you and to each other helps develop an atmosphere of mutual cooperation and collaboration. Outlining your workshop objectives and how you plan to achieve them will also help realize this goal. Effective questioning and active participation by group members further facilitates an atmosphere conducive to teaching and learning.

Tip 7 Encourage active participation and allow for problem solving and/or skill acquisition.

As we have stated earlier, *participation* is one key ingredients of a workshop. Involve the group in all phases of your session. Invite questions, group discussion, and debate. Encourage the participants to learn from each other. If a problem is presented to the group, allow for group solutions.

Whenever possible, limit group size so that active participation will be feasible. Physical arrangements can also facilitate interaction. For example, arrange the chairs so that participants can all see each other. It is questionable whether you can lead a workshop in a room that is set up in a lecture format.

To promote problem resolution, you may wish to divide your audience into smaller groups. In particular, group members could be asked to work through a set of problems or to practise a specific skill. For example, in a workshop on 'Teaching Procedural Skills' you might ask smaller groups of individuals to discuss how they would teach sigmoidoscopy to a group of medical students or residents. You might also ask them where this teaching fits into the curriculum and how this skill might best be taught. On the other hand, you might ask the group members to demonstrate the skill on a 'dummy' and receive feedback from the group.

Tip 8 Provide relevant and practical information.

Although active participation and interaction are essential to a successful workshop, the participants must also feel that they have learned something. Workshops are meant to



promote the acquisition of new knowledge as well as aptitudes and skills. Some information must, therefore, be provided.

Mini-lectures are definitely permissible in a workshop. They often help to set the tone, to cover the basic data, and to ensure a common ground for discussion. Two hours of lecturing in a two hour workshop is, however, not acceptable. Participants should have an opportunity to respond to the presented information. Questions and comments from group participants should also be encouraged.

Tip 9 Remember principles of adult learning.

Adults come to learning situations with a variety of motivations and expectations about teaching goals and methods. Moreover, as much of adult learning involves ‘relearning’ rather than new learning, adults often resent the ‘student’ role. Incentives for adult learning usually come from within the person, and feedback is more important than are tests and evaluation. (Knowles, 1978) It is important, therefore, to respect the group’s previous knowledge and experience, their motivation to learn, their potential resistance to change, and their ability to serve as co-learners.

Tip 10 Vary your activities and your style.

Make sure that the workshop flows at a pace that keeps the participants’ attention. Appropriate pacing implies moving the workshop along while leaving room for the group to slow down or speed up the presentation. Most medical teachers—and students—are accustomed to listening to large chunks of information in a short period of time, and yet, this may not be the best method of teaching—or learning.

Tip 11 Summarize your session and request feedback from the group.

Restate what you have tried to achieve in the workshop, synthesize the main points made, and discuss plans for follow-up, if appropriate. At times, it is helpful to ask group members to summarize what they have learned during the session. In addition, request feedback from the group as to whether you have accomplished your stated objectives and how they would improve the session in the future.

Tip 12 Enjoy yourself—and have fun!

It is important to enjoy what you are doing. If you are tired of the material you are presenting, abandon your subject. If you do not favor small group interactions, try another format, but do not call it a workshop. If you are enjoying yourself—and you are not personally bored with what you are doing—chances are that your participants will have a good time—and learn something in the process.



Quick Tips

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2. Find out who your audience will be
3. Determine your teaching method and design the appropriate workshop activities

The Workshop itself

4. Introduce the group members to you and to each other
5. Outline your objectives for the teaching session
6. Create a relaxed atmosphere for learning
7. Encourage active participation and allow for problem solving and/or skill acquisition
8. Provide relevant and practical information
9. Remember principles of adult learning
10. Vary your activities and your style
11. Summarize your session and request feedback
12. Enjoy yourself—and have fun!

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