

Improving the Impact of Short Courses and Workshops

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1.00 Introductory material

a) Introduction, aim and expected outcomes

There are many short courses and workshops for professionals that operate in a day or two days because people cannot be released for longer or cannot afford the time. When people return from short courses, they are often in the position of catching up for the time 'lost' to daily work and over the next few days of catching up, they forget what it is that they have learnt on the course. The contention of this workshop is that there is only any point in people going on short courses or to workshops if there is an impact on their practice. The aim of this course is to consider ways in which the impact of short courses and workshops can be delivered so that the new learning influences practice. It is anticipated that the participants on the course will be aware of and be able to deploy a range of methods of improving the impact of short courses and workshops so that they can run them effectively and in a time-efficient manner for their participants. In this way this workshop will have an impact on the practice of participants in their running of future workshops and short courses.

The course material is based mainly on two books, both published by Routledge Falmer, London

- **'Short courses and workshops: improving the impact of learning, training and professional development' (2001)**
- **The module and programme development handbook (2002).**

and my work on reflection and critical thinking

b) Content of Workshop

- Aims, outcomes and impact, learning and teaching
- Effective learning in short courses and workshops;
- Effective teaching in short courses and workshops
- A look at the structures of a short course - the way in which all course elements should contribute to the impact of the course
- A framework for integrating course/workshop learning into practice.

2.00 Some initial thinking....

- Describe a particular short course in which you were a participant, which could have been more effective in its impact on your practice immediately afterwards

- What impact did the course have on you and your practice two months later?

- What was ineffective about the course – in its structure, the teaching and the potential for impact on your practice?

3.00 To achieve something, you need to know what it is that you want to achieve and when: aims, learning outcomes, (objectives), impact and timing issues.

a) Looking at the terminology of intentions

You will need to think about the purpose that the course should fulfill. You may want to think about any distinction between what the course provider thinks the participants need to learn and what the learners think that they need to learn. Whose learning is it? These issues would probably come together in an aim or 'rationale' statement. An aim is a teaching intention. A teaching intention is what you intend to cover. It may be called an aim or sometimes 'rationale'.

Eg. The aim of the course is to develop the basic concepts of rabbit management.

b) Learning outcomes (objectives) are anticipations of what you hope that the learner will know and be able to do at the end of the course. This may be expressed as a learning outcome but may be called an objective. The form of a learning outcome tends to assume that there will be some sort of assessment at the end of the course. This is often not the case.

Eg. At the end of the course the participants will be expected to be able to explain the basic concepts of rabbit management, demonstrating relevant underpinning knowledge.

c) For short courses and workshops in professional practice, it is crucial to think beyond this – to think of the effect on what the participant will do in the workplace that is different as a result of the course – ie the **impact**. This should be related directly to the purpose of the course.

Eg. Participants are expected to be able to demonstrate basic skills and understanding of rabbit management in their practice (with statements that are more explicit about the standard of the action).

d) There is a **time** issue here. You may not have any contact with the learner in her actual practice and you are even less likely to be in contact 3, 6 months later – but you still need to think in impact terms and you may need to think of long term change and further gain in proficiency beyond the course. So you might want to think about at what stage you would feel it appropriate to make an evaluation or judgement of the quality of the impact (tomorrow – a week, a month, longer...)

4.00 Effectiveness and ineffectiveness in short courses

Describe the short course that you considered earlier in terms of its impact. As a group, question and discuss effectiveness and ineffectiveness in terms of impact on practice and write a list of features of short courses that might be effective and ineffective in having an impact on practice.

5.00 Some vocabulary of learning and teaching

- **Learning and teaching are different;**

- **learning and the representation of learning are different** and we only know that someone has learnt something when they represent their learning. In other words we should ask people to represent their learning during short courses or otherwise we have no knowledge of what is being learnt. This does not have to be formal assessment

- **This is also the main logic behind experiential learning.**

- **We learn different things from different forms of representation** (though we do not much exploit this in higher education).

6.00 Two dimensions of the quality of learning

a) What is the quality of the learning that you want to encourage on a short course? What is good and what is poor learning on a short course?

c) **The first dimension - Approaches to learning....**

Deep learning is where the learner's intention is to understand ideas for herself by –

- relating ideas to previous knowledge and experience;
- looking for patterns and underlying principles;
- checking evidence and relating it to conclusions;
- examining logic and argument cautiously and critically;
- becoming actively interested in course content.

Surface learning is where the learner's intention is to cope with course requirements by –

- studying without reflecting on either purpose or strategy;
- treating the course as unrelated bits of knowledge;
- memorising facts and procedures routinely;
- finding difficulty in making sense of new ideas presented;
- feeling undue pressure and worry about work.

Strategic approach is where the learner strives to achieve the highest grades by resort to strategy

- putting consistent effort into studying
- finding the right conditions and materials for studying;
- managing time and effort effectively;
- being alert to assessment requirements and criteria;
- gearing work to the perceived requirements for any assessment.

How do you ensure that participants take a deep approach?

d) **The second dimension - An exercise based on Baxter Magolda's work on conceptions of knowledge**

This is based on Baxter Magolda, M (1992) Knowing and Reasoning in College, San Francisco, Jossey-

Bass. Some of the material below is direct quotation – and some is modified.

Stages of epistemological development (development of the understanding of the nature of knowledge)

Stage of Absolute Knowing This is the least developed stage in Baxter Magolda's scheme. Knowledge is seen as certain or absolute. Learners believe that absolute answers exist in all areas of knowledge. When there is uncertainty it is because there is not yet access to the 'right' answers. Such learners may recognise that opinions can differ between experts but this is in differences of detail, opinion or misinformation. Formal learning is seen as a matter of absorption of the knowledge of the experts (eg teachers). Learning methods are seen as those that concern absorption and good memory of fact. Assessment is simply checking what the learner has 'acquired'. Knowledge is a commodity and learners are there to 'get' it and teachers 'pass it over'.

Transitional stage: Here there is partial certainty and partial uncertainty. Baxter Magolda describes the transitional knowing stage as one in which there are doubts about the certainty of knowledge and learners accept that there is some uncertainty. Authorities may differ in view because there is uncertainty. Learners see themselves as needing to understand rather than just acquire knowledge so that they may make judgements as to how best to apply it. Teachers are seen as facilitating the understanding and the application of knowledge and assessment concerns these qualities, and not just acquisition.

Independent knowing: Independent knowers recognise the uncertainty of knowledge, and feel that everyone has her own opinion or beliefs. They seem to be at an embryonic form of the more sophisticated stage of contextual knowing. The learning processes are changed by this new view because now learners can now expect to have an opinion of their own and can begin to think through issues and to express themselves in a valid manner. They have to make judgements and they also regard their peers as having useful contributions to make in helping them to make up their minds. They will expect teachers to support the development of independent views, and to provide a context for exploration. However 'In the excitement over independent thinking, the idea of judging some perspectives as better or worse is overlooked' (Baxter Magolda 1992:55). In other words, they do not sufficiently contextualise their understanding and cannot yet see the role of context as having a bearing on the judgement.

Contextual knowing: Knowledge is understood to be constructed and any judgement must be made on the basis of the evidence in that context. The way in which knowledge is constructed is understood to relate to the consideration of the quality of knowledge claims in the given context. Opinions must now be supported by evidence and recognition of contextual influence. The knower herself and the reader / receiver of the knowledge are both seen as relevant to the process of knowing. The view of the teacher is of a partner in the development of appropriate knowledge. The learner sees herself as a constructor of knowledge

7.00 How can you encourage appropriate learning in a course?

- What kind of ways of working with participants will encourage deep learning that is reasonably strategic and enable participants to work with a reasonably developed conception of knowledge? The model presented below can be a means of ensuring that deep and strategic learning takes place. The bit that we most often miss out is the raising of awareness of current practice as a backdrop against which the changes can be developed. I come back to this framework later

A framework to enhance the impact of learning in short courses

Develop an awareness of the nature of current practice

What is your current work practice with reference to this subject matter or these skills?

Clarify the new learning and how it relates to your current understandings and practice

What have you learnt on this course that can improve your practice?

Integrate the new learning and the current understandings and practice

How does this new learning relate to what you knew and did before?

Anticipate or imagine the nature of improved practice

How will you act in a way that your practice is improved as a result of the learning – what will you do that is different tomorrow?

8.00 Teaching, training, instruction and facilitation

a) What are the qualities of a good teacher or good teaching in a short course?

Teaching/training/instruction/facilititation can be conceived to fall into two areas

- **The management and facilitation of appropriate learning;**
- **Technical qualities.**

The management and facilitation of appropriate learning

A good teacher will (not in a specific order)

- Focus on the processes of the learners' learning (not her teaching performance);
- Work with a holistic view of the course and its structure – not just thinking of the material for today. She will relate it and help learners to link it with previously encountered ideas;
- Manage balances in time and workload. This involves ensuring that the material is covered, that the learners are not overloaded, that she, as teacher, is not overloaded, that the pace of the learning is appropriate, that there is sufficient 'intellectual space' (time for reflection) and so on;
- Manage a positive emotional climate, making the teaching room a stimulating and pleasant place in which to learn;
- Manage the attention of learners – taking account of attention spans at the time (not making assumptions);
- Manage the depth of learning (see the exercise on approaches to learning);
- Enable learners to know what they are expected to learn and how they will know when they have learnt it;
- Monitor the processes of learning among participants, helping them to know how well they are doing, as well as being aware of that herself;
- Require learners to represent their learning – so that they are active and can learn from the representation of their learning;
- Enable learners to develop a sense of ownership of their learning – so that it feels relevant to their own lives and circumstances or needs;

- Challenge learners so that they have to think about what they are doing – again so that they are active;
- Enable learners to develop awareness of their own learning processes – those who think about their learning tend to be better learners;
- Monitor the progress of learning – giving feedback as appropriate;
- While it is important to facilitate the learning of individual students, there is also a need to pay attention to progress of the whole group and to facilitate a movement of all. This means that there is a need to take account of those who might be having more difficulties – either with the learning or because they have started the course with some disadvantage.

Technical qualities of the teacher and her skills

These technical qualities and skills can supersede all of the references to facilitating deep learning above. They include:

- Skillful, clear use of voice or medium for communication (eg writing);
- Conveyance of credibility – so that the learners can trust the material of teaching;
- Clear explanation and presentation;
- The teacher arranges content in an organised and well considered sequence;
- There is a display of enthusiasm for the subject matter of the course.

Pick out three of the points about good teaching above and reflect – in writing – on how you could improve your practice.

9.00 Returning to the learners and linking with the management of learning – what are important differences between learners?

- a) What are some of the differences between learners? – Find five differences or characteristics that will affect what and /or how the learn.
- b) Taking one of these differences, find three ways in which to manage it – at least one of the three should be a new method to you – and it might be a bit 'off the wall'.
- c) How would the best trainer that you have ever experienced manage the matter?

10.00 Structural issues in courses – the structure of the course itself

a) In a short course or workshop, by definition, you have very little time to facilitate learning in such a way as to produce an impact on practice. Every element of the course has to be geared towards producing an impact. The list below is a range of elements that can each be tuned to help towards the development of impact on practice.

The structure of the course itself – length, shape, gaps, assessments, mentors, etc.

Activities that facilitate the learning of the subject matter – theory knowledge and skills – teaching of content, prework, reflective work, handouts, assessment tasks, independent or resource based sessions.

Practice – practical situations

Introductory or summarising activities that increase the coherence of the subject matter – introductory session describing the course, summary, assessment tasks, conclusion, group rounds on 'what have I learnt', project work

Activities to encourage integration of new learning and associated thinking into the prior patterns of knowledge and skill – reflection periods, journal writing, discussion of what I do prework, problem solving sessions where issues are brought to the course from the practice situation for discussion, project work etc.

Activities to facilitate group functioning and thereby to create a better learning environment – eg introductions and the manner in which names are established, the use of groundrules, activities that acknowledge personal expectations of the course, games, warm-ups, energisers, long lunch breaks etc.

Activities to support individual learning or coping behaviours – eg coaching mentoring or tutorial sessions, co-counselling as a method, the identification of work based mentors

Activities that anticipate future training and future training needs of participants – discussions of further learning possibilities, following up recognition of deficits

Evaluation activities

Social activities – lunch, breaks, etc

Issues concerned with administration of the course – eg housekeeping, agreements about breaks,

Work on one of these 'elements' in small groups, producing three principles for good practice or hints or tips in each.

11.00 A focus on specific aspects of some courses

Handouts

What principles should guide the writing of handouts for a course to maximise impact?

Pework

Quick to complete – there should be no more than 5 tasks. One useful structure is:
What is your current practice;
How would you like things to be?

What are the hindrances to reaching that state.
I often ask people to write one or two case studies or examples of practice relevant to the course to work on in the course.

Assessment tasks

What do we mean by the rather global word 'assessment'?
Assessment tasks represent a means by which the impact of the course can be increased. For example, the length of the course extended into the actual time of practice.
Self assessment and peer assessment

Learning logs, journals and other reflective tasks...

12.00 A structure for the course in order to maximize impact?

We go back to the framework mentioned earlier. The framework can be the basis of evaluation, structuring learning or reflection etc..... It also asks you what you will do differently tomorrow after this course.....

Anticipate or imagine the nature of improved practice

How will you act in a way that your practice is improved as a result of the learning – what will you do that is different tomorrow?

Appendix Baxter Magolda exercise – quotations are grouped in stages

Absolutist –knowledge is certain or absolute;

I just like to listen – just sit and take notes from an overhead. The material is right there. And if you have a problem, you can ask the teacher and he can explain it to you. You hear it, you see it and then you can write it down (p 73)

I like getting involved with the class – by answering questions and asking questions. Even if you think you know everything, there are still questions you can ask. When the lecturer asks questions, you can try to answer them to your best ability. Don't just let the lecturer talk to you, have him present questions to you (p 73)

I have to see what I'm learning, and I have to know why. I have a good memory and it's very easy for me to memorise facts. The advantage is that it's kind of cut and dried. The information is there – all you have to do is to soak it up in your brain (p77).

I like teachers who will give you as much as you need and not just leave you with a little small idea and have you talk it out. I like it when they give you a lot of information. Then you can discuss it (p31)

In my opinion, the best way to learn is to listen in class and not be distracted (p34)

Transitional knowing – There is partial certainty and partial uncertainty

My French teacher is getting away from the book exercises because everyone falls asleep. She's started getting us into group discussions using our reading, but she corrects our tenses and sentence structure. It's much more real, much more practical and I think that's what we need. People are glad to be learning something that we can actually use (p 39)

When you've got fifty other people in the room challenging your views every ten seconds, you learn to assimilate everything. You try to piece out what you think is the best out of a conglomerate whole. That's the best (p105)

I had a different teacher in the sophomore level of the subject, and I learned to interpret things differently. When you have someone else give you a different interpretation of the same subject, you're forced to go back and do comparisons. And I thought, well, why would this person teach this subject this way and be successful and at the same time there's a person teaching it in a different way but still being successful? It begins to change you a bit (p103).

We'd start a class having read the material and then the lecturer would walk in and say something completely wrong. A shout would break out from the back of the class and we'd just start knocking at each other going back and forth at the same topic for the entire class period. Doing that just ingrains in your mind that no matter how right you think you are, you've got to hear somebody else out because they're to some extent right too (p105)

I have a tutor this semester who puts an outline on the board, of things he's going to cover. That way, even if I don't have the clearest notes – at least I know what he intended to cover.

Independent knowing – Learning is uncertain – everyone has her own beliefs

I've decided that the only person that you can really depend on is yourself. Each individual has their own truth. No-one has the right to decide 'this has to be your truth too' (p136)

I don't set anything that I feel in cement, which is what I did before. I've found that my foundations completely crumbled out from under me when I went on that exchange programme. I had to rebuild them for myself, which is the best thing that ever happened to me (p 137)

I want to be challenged. I am in a gender theory course that has a lot of women's studies students in it. There I feel challenged. My own politics are closely like theirs, but I don't have the background that they have. When I speak up, I have to really concentrate on what I think, communicate it effectively, and then when there's a discrepancy between what I think and what someone else thinks then I feel I can grow (p53)

It's funny. You read the same thing yet people see three different stories or three different meanings or interpretations. It helps you to reaffirm your own opinion, modify it or whatever is necessary (p50)

I guess I take everything in and then I go home at night and kind of sort out what I want and what I don't want. Some things, I guess – maybe because of my morals and values – will sit better with me and will seem like fact for me. And other things, I'm just like "I don't really think so". And I throw them out (p141)

Contextual knowing – Knowledge is constructed and any judgement must be made on the basis of the evidence in that context.

As you hear other people's opinions, you piece together what you really think. Who has the valid point? Whose point is not valid in your opinion? And (you) come to some other new understanding. Even if it's the same basic belief, maybe (you will be) able to look at it from a more (multi)dimensional perspective (p173).

I spent time getting a general feel for the topic as a whole before I made any generalisations. And then, after that, I started piecing together any general ideas that I believed in or general principles that I then tried to defend....And if it seemed like I was going against that principle too often or disagreeing with it too often, then I would sit down and reevaluate. Like maybe I'd learned something new that changed my way of thinking. So then I'd have to sit down and reevaluate that and then possibly change my mind accordingly (p174)

It's super-subjective. It is largely a matter of weighing other people's opinions and their facts against what you, yourself, have previously processed (p59)

In some classes, particularly when you're talking politics, you have people that are super-fired up on the left and on the right. Those people who are totally impassioned by their thoughts and feelings help to offset each other, so you can kind of arrive at something in the middle. You have then to take it in and let it process before you form a reaction (p59)

You can look at an issue from both sides and it's still history and you're still getting those facts and those different opinions about things and that's a kind of basis. But now you're taking that and working with it to come up with some sort of conclusion, or maybe not a conclusion and that's the conclusion in itself (p177)