

THE ACCIDENTAL EDUCATOR'S CURRICULUM WRITING TOOLKIT

Many people who work to stop domestic and sexual violence find themselves teaching others, even though they may not have formal training in creating educational programs. This toolkit is here to help. It offers a simple framework to create effective, learner-focused educational opportunities. Whether you're developing workshops, entire courses, or community outreach programs, this toolkit will help you engage your audience, create meaningful learning experiences, and drive impactful change in your advocacy work.



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¹ Ctrl+click on the table of contents to skip ahead to any section

LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING

Let's start with a basic definition of learning: the goal of a learning experience is to **CHANGE** a learner's knowledge, skills and/or dispositions. This change may expand on a foundation of pre-existing understanding and abilities. However, it may also be completely new and, in some cases, require learners to confront misunderstandings in order to grapple with the new information.

Developing a curriculum for adults requires instructional designers to consider a variety of factors.

First, adult learners have their own needs and attitudes related to learning that should be considered.

Adult learners are:

- Self-directed
- Concerned with practicality and connections to their work²
- Problem solvers
- Highly motivated to learn but...
- Highly resistant to change

By focusing on making connections between the content and their work, you can help support the motivation adult learners need to grow their understanding while cushioning their concerns about change.

WHY USE PARTICIPATORY METHODS?

Participatory methods involve action-oriented and interactive teaching practices that promote active involvement from learners, contrary to traditional lecture-based approaches. While lectures have their place, research indicates they are among the least effective teaching methods. Participatory methods empower learners by giving them ownership over their learning process, with the facilitator acting as a “guide on the side” rather than a “sage on the stage.” These methods encourage participants to engage with each other, making the learning experience more personal and allowing them to share their ideas, experiences, and insights. This approach aligns with Paulo Freire's emphasis on education as a collaborative

² “Work” in this context is more than a place of employment, it can include internal work, organizing, hobbies, and other callings.

and liberating practice³, particularly relevant for adult learners doing anti-violence work, as it fosters an inclusive and dynamic learning environment.

EDUCATION THEORY FOR ADULT LEARNERS

There are many frameworks to design training for adult learners. This toolkit will focus on theories informed by Paulo Freire, Jane Vella, and William Horton. This framework is here to guide your development process. It is up to you, the instructional designer(s) to fill in the subject matter and create an educational program that is relevant to the needs of your audience and communities.

The following are a few major takeaways that all instructional designers should consider:

1. **Adults learn best through participation**, allowing them to synthesize the learning content with their own experiences of domestic and sexual violence advocacy and other anti-violence work. Whenever possible, encourage participants to incorporate their own experiences into the learning process. Additionally, provide opportunities for learners to reflect on and process how the new knowledge applies to their personal context.
2. **The timing and sequence of activities matter**. Adults learn best when they trust their fellow participants. During training, take time to build a sense of trust and reciprocity among participants. This can be achieved through relationship-building activities, such as relevant icebreakers and introductions, and starting with simple, non-threatening activities, such as pair shares, before progressing to more complex tasks like demonstrations and role plays.
3. **Variety in activities enhances learning**. Using the same method repeatedly can lead to disengagement and boredom. Incorporate diverse participatory activities, complemented by brief lectures, to maintain engagement and foster a dynamic learning environment.
4. **Purpose and clarity are essential**. Adult learners become impatient if they do not perceive progress toward a goal. Ensure all activities are clearly linked to learning objectives and communicate the objectives to participants. This helps learners understand what they will learn, why it matters, how it applies to their work in advocacy and anti-violence, and how they will demonstrate proficiency in the material.

³ For more on Paulo Freire's work see: <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/pedagogy-of-the-oppressed/>
www.futureswithoutviolence.org/ILED

NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE⁴

A needs assessment is a key component of any training design. Ideally, it will be an in-depth process that may include surveys, interviews, focus groups, and direct observation with key people and groups. Knowledge of the target audience is very important to the success of training and the target audience's needs should be centered when addressing the training issue. Below are some key questions to consider when there is little time or resources to do a full needs assessment.

SOME KEY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. What is the problem you are trying to solve *with education*?
3. Who would be the most appropriate target audience for training?
4. What is known about the target audience? Some key information may include:
 - a. Demographics
 - b. Location
 - c. Background
 - d. Experience (knowledge, skills, attitudes prior to training)
 - e. Literacy level
 - f. Availability and desire to participate in training
5. What are the assumptions you are making about the target audience?
6. What does the audience already know? What do they need and want to know?
7. What constraints will you need to address in designing a training program for this audience (for example, social constraints, varied experience levels, logistics)?

⁴ This section comes from Participatory Training for Adult Learners. Activities and Examples for Trainers in Livestock Systems

Adult Learning Theories. Available at: https://teal.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Fact-Sheets/11_%20TEAL_Adult_Learning_Theory.pdf • Vella, J. (2002). Chapter 1: Twelve Principles for Effective Adult Learning. Available at: http://www.globallearningpartners.com/downloads/resources/LTL_Sample_Chapter.pdf

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

WRITING SMART LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR A TRAINING NEED

After conducting a needs assessment and learning as much as possible about the target audience, you should use that information to write learning objectives. Well-defined learning objectives are essential for designing a curriculum that is accessible and responsive to learners' specific needs. Clear objectives also enable consistent and fair evaluation, reduce bias, and promote an active learning process.

A learning objective should state exactly what the learner will be able to do at the end of training and should be an observable action that focuses on the learner.

STEPS TO WRITING A SMART LEARNING OBJECTIVE (CRITERIA)⁵

There are no exact guidelines for how many learning objectives a training should have. For example, a 2-hour training may only have one objective. The most important (and helpful) characteristic of learning objectives is directly **saying what the learners will be able to do** at the end of training. This also guides you, as the instructional designer, to align the objectives with appropriate activities.

A “SMART” learning objective, is one that is: S – Specific: says exactly what the learner will be able to do. M – Measurable: can be observed by the end of the training session(s). A – Attainable: for the participants within the scheduled time and specified conditions. R – Relevant: to the needs of the participants. T – Time-bound: achievable by the end of the training session(s).

THE FOLLOWING STEPS ARE HELPFUL IN WRITING SMART LEARNING OBJECTIVES.

1. Conduct a needs assessment and learn as much as possible about the target audience (see page 5).
2. Generate a list of all the knowledge (topics and information), skills, and/or attitudes that the participants must have in order to address the identified training issue.

⁵ Adapted from Williams, R.J. (2019). Participatory Training for Adult Learners. Activities and Examples for Trainers in Livestock Systems. Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Livestock Systems. University of Florida: Gainesville.

3. Categorize the list into “must know” “nice to know” and “does not need to know now.” This will allow for prioritization and streamlining of information to address in the training. The timeframe for training is important in this process. For example, what can realistically be covered in a two-hour training versus an eight-hour training?
4. Organize the “must know” and, if possible, the “nice to know” items into a logical order. This is often based on the order in which the knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes must be learned (see Bloom’s Taxonomy below).
5. Make the items learner-centered. For example, rather than stating “the facilitator will teach about sexual violence,” focus on the learner by rewording to “the participant will _____ sexual violence.”
6. Add a measurable action word (pages 5-6) and rewrite into a logical sentence. For example, “By the end of this training session, participants will be able to explain in their own words the concept of intersectionality and its importance in sexual violence advocacy.”
7. If desired, add a condition and criteria to make the learning objective more specific. For example, “Within three months of completing the training, participants will be able to implement at least three trauma-informed care practices in their work with survivors, as evidenced by self-reports and supervisor evaluations.”

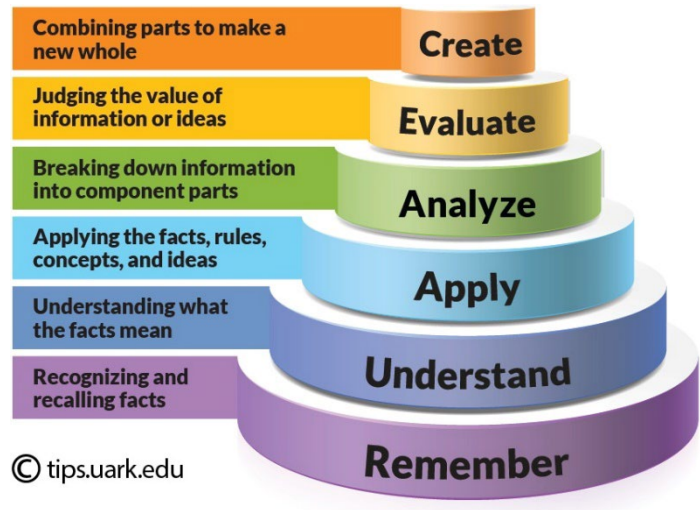
BLOOM’S TAXONOMY

Bloom's taxonomy is a hierarchical framework for categorizing educational goals and objectives into levels of complexity and specificity, ranging from basic knowledge recall to higher-order critical thinking skills. We can't expect learners to be able to “create” a new program at the end of a 90-minute webinar, but we can expect that learners will be better able to explain how a new program might benefit their organization with the same amount of time.

Bloom’s Taxonomy is a helpful tool for writing assessable learning objectives because it provides a structured approach to defining clear, measurable, and achievable goals that progress from simple to complex tasks, ensuring comprehensive and effective learning outcomes. It is also a helpful tool for educators to create targeted learning experiences that promote deeper understanding and skill development.

Key Questions:

1. Based on your needs assessment, what should participants **think, feel, or do** because of the class?
2. What level of **cognitive functioning** are you hoping to achieve?



3. What **actions** will demonstrate that participants are able to remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, or create? Objectives should complete this phrase *“By the end of this class/session/course, participants will be better able to...”*
4. Use the Bloom’s Taxonomy chart⁶ on the following page to write your objectives.

FOR MORE ON BLOOM’S TAXONOMY AND WRITING LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Using Bloom’s Taxonomy to Write Effective Learning Outcomes:
<https://tips.uark.edu/using-blooms-taxonomy/>
- Objective Builder Tool: <https://cdl.ucf.edu/teach/resources/objective-builder-tool/>

⁶ Chart adapted from: <https://tips.uark.edu/using-blooms-taxonomy/>

Bloom's Level	Key Verbs (keywords)	Example Learning Objective "By the end of ____, participants will be better able to..."
Create	design, formulate, build, invent, create, compose, generate, derive, modify, develop.	... develop and present a comprehensive community outreach plan about DVSA, incorporating at least four different engagement strategies
Evaluate	choose, support, relate, determine, defend, judge, grade, compare, contrast, argue, justify, support, convince, select, evaluate.	...evaluate the effectiveness of two different advocacy strategies used in DVSA prevention campaigns, providing a critical assessment and suggestions for improvement
Analyze	classify, break down, categorize, analyze, diagram, illustrate, criticize, simplify, associate.	... analyze and differentiate between at least three different case studies of DVSA incidents, identifying structural factors involved in each case
Apply	calculate, predict, apply, solve, illustrate, use, demonstrate, determine, model, perform, present.	...implement at least three trauma-informed care practices in their work with survivors of DVSA, as evidenced by self-reports and supervisor evaluations.
Understand	describe, explain, paraphrase, restate, give original examples of, summarize, contrast, interpret, discuss.	...explain in their own words the concept of safety planning and its importance in anti-violence advocacy
Remember	list, recite, outline, define, name, match, quote, recall, identify, label, recognize.	...list at least five key terms related to DVSA advocacy, such as "consent," "coercion," and "trauma-informed care," with 100% accuracy.

ACCESSIBILITY

Cognitive accessibility refers to the design and delivery of educational content that accommodates diverse cognitive abilities and learning styles, ensuring that all learners can engage with and comprehend the material. It is crucial to create an inclusive learning environment where everyone, including those with cognitive disabilities such as ADHD, dyslexia, or autism, can succeed. To incorporate cognitive accessibility into curriculum writing, consider using clear and straightforward language and avoiding jargon or overly complex sentences. Additionally, provide information in multiple formats (e.g., text, visuals, audio) and include structured, consistent layouts to help learners navigate content easily. Breaking down information into manageable chunks and using headings, bullet points, and summaries can also enhance understanding and retention. By prioritizing cognitive accessibility, educators can create more equitable and effective learning experiences for all students.

Your needs assessment process should determine if your audience may be more likely to need a certain accommodation and this should be paid specific attention in the design process. For example, if you know that a large number of people in your audience are Deaf, the need for captioned videos, [skilled interpretation](#), and accessible activities should be designed specifically to accommodate Deaf participants regardless of explicit requests.

If you are an OVW grantee and need technical assistance to make your curriculum accessible for people with disabilities, reach out to hello@activatingchange.org or visit their website at www.activatingchange.org.

ACTIVITIES

There are no hard and fast rules for which types of activities are best for which types of objectives, but we do have some advice that may help in pairing objectives with activities.

PAIRING OBJECTIVES WITH ACTIVITIES⁷

Look at the objectives you have drafted. Presumably, you have used an action verb to describe what the learner can expect to think, feel, or do after the learning session has concluded (see page 9). Allow the verb to lead the design of the activity.

For instance, if your objective is “Learners will be better able to **demonstrate** trauma-informed peer counseling skills when responding to survivors on the crisis line,” where does the verb “demonstrate” lead you? Perhaps, in this case, you would consider a role play with learners practicing trauma-informed peer counseling techniques together. By contrast, if your objective was “Learners will be better able to **list** trauma-informed peer counseling techniques,” the verb leads you to a different activity, right?

Some considerations include:

1. What is the action verb and topic and which activities could be used to help the participants reach the objective?
2. How complex is the objective in context? Can it be measured through a very fast and simple activity like a pair share or does it require the participants to delve into the topic and rely on analytical skills such as a case study?

ACTIVITY PLANNING

- **Objectives:** What learning objectives will the activity address?
- **Time needed:** How much time will the activity take? Be sure to include time for transition, discussion, and any processing that needs to occur. Remember that most activities take longer than you think they will.
- **Materials & preparation:** What materials do you need? What do you need to do to prepare?

⁷ Adapted from Williams, R.J. (2019). Participatory Training for Adult Learners. Activities and Examples for Trainers in Livestock Systems. Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Livestock Systems. University of Florida: Gainesville.

- **Related lecture:** Are there lecture materials that need to be paired with the activity?
- **Step-by-step process:** What is the step-by-step process for running the activity?
Prepare written instructions for how to conduct an activity from start to finish and ask someone for feedback on whether the instructions are clear and thorough. What questions should you ask, or explanations should you give during the activity? Where should you pause for questions?
- **Discussion/processing questions:** What questions should you ask at the end of the activity? What processing needs to happen to complete the link from the activity to the objectives?
- **Resources:** What handouts do you need to provide? Are there readings or other prep work the participants need access to?

Types of Learning Activities⁸

Type	Best Uses	Special Aspects	For Best Results
Icebreakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity for participants to get to know each other and establish trust and comfort • Time to transition into the space and prepare for the session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can provide the facilitator insight into the group, including group dynamics and starting point regarding the content. • Can be time-consuming depending on the prompt and responses from participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is often necessary to establish a time boundary and choose questions according to the time available. • Combine with an introduction activity or connect the question to the content and use it as an informal needs assessment.
Energizers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time to re-energize the group during a longer session • Transition from difficult or complex subject matter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not content specific, usually humorous or fun with the goal of getting participants to laugh and/or relax. • Can also be a grounding exercise or something simple like a collective breath. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use when the participants seem weary, bored, or stressed

⁸ See the [Activity Cookbook](#) from Endurance Learning for more adaptable activity ideas with instructions for use!

Type	Best Uses	Special Aspects	For Best Results
Lecture (including a <i>panel</i> of individual presenters)	<p>Mini-lecture only (15 minutes or <i>less</i>) to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up framework of concept/ analysis Summarize group work and apply to concept/ analysis Deliver concluding (learning) points 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ignores <i>experience</i> of learners May bore learners if lengthy or a panel of lecturers Presumes that “coverage” = learning Can imply superiority of speaker 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use only as a <i>mini-lecture</i>, with 15 minute maximum Make it interactive—ask and allow questions Follow with interactive activity to apply information, unless using as brief closure/ transition
Small-Group Learning Activity (e.g., discussion, exercise, problem-solving)	<p>To integrate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners’ experiences Individual knowledge Specific perspectives Consensus on issues <p>Responses & reactions—evaluation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners can practice using information provided Practical work context better addresses adult education needs Can use with large audiences seated as small working groups Faculty and learners have greater exchange of ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare and give precise, written instructions Allocate time to specific activities and monitor Use optimal working groups of 5 (no fewer than 3, no more than 8-9) Follow with structured, large-group discussion & concluding points (with or w/o reports)
Storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building empathy To develop a communal sense of purpose Contextualizing content and enhancing memory retention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stories of change-makers in anti-violence advocacy can inspire learners Encourages critical thinking Can be presented in different formats (oral, video, auditory, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use different narratives so learners can see themselves Align with learning objectives to demonstrate educational purpose Involve learners in the story, if possible

Type	Best Uses	Special Aspects	For Best Results
Small-Group Learning Activity (e.g., discussion, exercise, problem-solving)	<p>To integrate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners' experiences • Individual knowledge • Specific perspectives • Consensus on issues <p>Responses & reactions—evaluation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners can practice using information provided • Practical work context better addresses adult education needs • Can use with large audiences seated as small working groups • Faculty and learners have greater exchange of ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write concrete, specific learning objectives • Prepare and give precise, written instructions • Allocate time to specific activities and monitor • Use optimal working groups of 5 (no fewer than 3, no more than 8-9) • Follow with structured, large-group discussion & concluding points (with or w/o reports)
Individual Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To reflect on particular issues & their resolution • To develop individual plans of action • To apply new information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaches half of learning styles (<i>reflective</i>) • Interchange with more interactive learning activities • Strive to use at least once because infrequently included 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give clear instructions for individual work • Ask learners to share results of individual work for comments by faculty & other learners • Conduct structured discussion & provide closure

Type	Best Uses	Special Aspects	For Best Results
Demonstration (can include in small-group activity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To model new skills or best (promising) practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can reduce tension about attempting new methods Requires an established level of trust between participants. Observation of participant demonstrations can support evaluation of the course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set the context for learners & stay in role Provide, written, scripted roles for each faculty or learner volunteer actor
Role Play or Other Experiential Activity (can incorporate as Large- or Small-Group Learning Activity or Demonstration)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To assess learners' levels of knowledge and experience To appreciate different personal experiences As issue spotting activity to assess group needs See other Best Uses under Small-Group Learning Activity above. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners can apply new information with little risk if scripted Eases participation by more introverted learners because of assigned role Some learners complain; but few refuse to play role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write concrete, specific learning objectives Prepare and give precise, written instructions for exercise and scripts for actors Allocate time to specific activities and monitor Follow with structured discussion & conclude with authoritative summary or mini-lecture
Debate & Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To show controversy and diversity To provoke discussion <i>But always incorporate clear, unequivocal faculty conclusion</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires a moderator Moderator must carefully monitor time and always preserve time allotted for learner questions and comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly define objectives and share with debate presenters and learners If panel, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor the time and engage all panelists in answering learners' questions

Note the tips in the template below for planning your education session, and save the blank template on page 18 for when you're ready to start writing your curriculum.

LESSON PLAN TEMPLATE – WITH TIPS⁹

Title of Training Segment:

Overall Goal of Training Segment:

Date & Time:

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this training segment, the participants will be better able to:

1. Write assessable learning objectives that focus on the learner and include an observable action.
- 2.
- 3.

**** Don't shortchange yourself or your learners by not spending time on the learning objectives. I don't always love writing them either, but I promise that taking time to think about what you want your learners to know or do differently will impact what activities you ultimately include in your session. ****

Materials:

- Flipchart paper
- Scratch paper (let your learners know in advance if you expect them to provide any of their own materials, especially in a virtual setting)
-

⁹ Tips and lesson plan adapted from Endurance Learning: <https://endurancelearning.com/blog/create-lesson-plan-for-adults/>

Procedures/Instructional Technique:

Estimated Time	Content/Learning Points	Instructional Technique
Estimate the time needed with flexibility for learners who need more time to process and move around.	Don't write a script for yourself unless you absolutely need it. Most people engage with a group better if they have talking points that they can refer to.	Use this Instructional Technique column to check yourself. Lectures are okay, and so are group discussions. This column will tell you whether you use the activities you're most comfortable with too often.
How much time is needed for events that are not related to the actual learning objectives (ex. icebreakers, introductions, getting seated, breaks, transition time, etc.?)	Be mindful of the amount of content you plan to cover in a course—learners are much more likely to take something away from your course if there is time to process and plenty of opportunities to engage!	

LESSON PLAN TEMPLATE¹⁰

Title of Training Segment:

Overall Goal of Training Segment:

Date & Time:

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this segment, participants will be better able to:

-
-
-

Materials:

-
-
-

Procedures/Instructional Technique:

Estimated Time	Content/Learning Points	Instructional Technique

¹⁰ Lesson Plan template created by Endurance Learning: <https://endurancelearning.com/blog/create-lesson-plan-for-adults/>

EVALUATING YOUR COURSE

SINGLE POINT RUBRIC: EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT CURRICULUM

A single-point rubric is designed to serve as a formative assessment. Rather than assigning numerical values based on the criteria, the rubric focuses on the relative strength or weakness of the stated criteria. The rubric can be used by both the instructional designer and the reviewer as part of the ongoing curriculum development process. They can add comments under both strengths and concerns for each item. These comments can then serve as touchpoints for self-assessment and discussions between reviewer and instructional designer.

The rubric below (page 20) takes into account key considerations for a learner-centered and engaging curriculum design. It can be used for face-to-face, hybrid, and online learning experiences. As needed, special considerations for the platforms are included in the criteria.

Concerns	Criteria	Strengths
	Pre-course survey: used to gather general information about the learners as well as any content-related questions or confusions	
	Description: a course description with pre-requisites (if any), clear learning outcomes and what is expected of learners is provided ONLINE: make the type of course clear: Asynchronous? Synchronous? Self-paced? Facilitated?	
	Learning environment: appropriate to content and goals with clear instructions on how to access all elements of the learning environment ONLINE: User-friendly interface with clear instructions and timely support; careful choice of user-friendly tools;	
	Goals, objectives and outcomes: clearly stated, actionable objectives that include lower and higher-order thinking skills	
	Clear expectations for learners around learning environment, content and assessment ONLINE: complete, detailed schedule of assignments and any live meetings; community norms for online interaction if used; tips for succeeding in an online course	
	Plans for ongoing evaluation and feedback	
	Course centers the needs of learners with opportunities for learners to share experiences and make connections to their work	
	The course demonstrates equity, inclusivity and accessibility in the overall design, resources and activities	
	Content is intentionally chosen and chunked effectively and efficiently with interactive elements built in to foster engagement	
	Learners have formal opportunities to interact and collaborate with others if appropriate	
	Learners know how to get timely help and support	
	Post-course follow up: in addition to the evaluation, a follow up with learners some time afterwards to garner effectiveness and usefulness of the training	

FINAL THOUGHTS

Really focus on what your learners NEED to KNOW and be able TO DO or THINK at the end of the training versus what you think is interesting or nice to know. The history of a movement may be fascinating but not necessary to meet your objectives and can chew up a lot of time. Remember, adult learners want practical information that can be almost immediately connected to their work. The general rule is to be as intentional as possible with every choice you make from content to activities. Similarly, don't allow a beloved activity to drive the entire direction of your learning session. This is the definition of the "the tail wagging the dog." If it does not serve your objectives, omit it.

Just because you said something does not mean the learners "got it." Learning is not about depositing your knowledge into someone else's brain—it is a participatory process rooted in the learners' experiences.

There's no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom. —Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

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