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Making Workshops Work

Jacqueline Davis and Robert Young

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Seminars and workshops—a practical, no-nonsense, relatively easy to schedule, participatory means of conveying and sharing ideas. Right? Only if planned and executed well. On the surface, a group session may seem to be one of the easiest best and ways to study new approaches to teaching and learning. It can be scheduled for one or more large blocks of time, freeing participants for other activities during the term. It provides opportunity for experimentation, a time and place to play out new ideas for the classroom before trying them with students. And it is a structure which promotes discussion, people talking to each other about problems and ideas.

But workshops and seminars can backfire. The large blocks of time, if not carefully organized, are more likely to bore rather than stimulate, experimentation can be painful if one is not prepared to fail occasionally, and discussion can not only falter, but dwindle away to nothing if not conducted by a sensitive leader. From the Bush-funded faculty development programs have come many suggestions for making seminars and workshops work, and we have grouped them into four categories from the planning stage to follow-up activities. Even though all suggestions will not be feasible for all schools, we hope they will stimulate thought and discussion among those planning faculty development activities.

I. Planning: Why and how do we get it together?

- 1. Involve participants in the planning. Publicize the tentative topics and goals, and invite comment and assistance.**
- 2. Plan the activities based on the specific needs of participants. Find out these needs from formal and informal observation,**

surveys and interviews, accreditation and other evaluation reports, surveys of students, previous seminars and workshops, and even educated hunches.

3. Advertise early and preregister faculty. People will commit themselves to coming and can be more easily involved in planning of activities. Specifically invite people to participate, by phone or note.
4. Identify and recruit resources for planning and conducting the activity after topics, goals, and needs are known—not before.
5. Use faculty from other campuses to introduce controversial or sensitive subjects. They may be more able speak frankly and objectively than faculty closer to the subject.
6. If possible, plan the activity as part of a continuing instructional improvement effort, so that knowledge gained can be immediately used in that effort.
7. Plan a variety of activities: some straight information; some sharing of what people already know; some involvement (a self assessment, an exercise, a discussion).
8. When developing materials and presentations, use terminology and examples familiar to participants. Avoid unnecessary jargon.
9. Provide a well-chosen short reading prior to the workshop to stimulate interest in the subject.
10. Prepare packets of relevant materials for participants.
11. Share the leadership with others working in the subject area.
12. Put together a list of materials on the topic. Include the names of resource people and times they would be available for appointments.
13. Provide resource people with information about participants.
14. Check any equipment beforehand. Have an alternative plan in case it breaks down.

II. Presentation: What is our game plan?

1. Be sure everyone knows everyone else.
2. Create a positive physical and psychological climate for the activity.
3. Make sure participants know what exactly is going to happen during each part of the activity. Also, assess what participants

expect. Resolve any conflicts between what they expect. People may opt out or you may modify the session somewhat.

4. Stimulate motivation to learn by creating awareness between what participants now know or can do and what they might know or be able to do after the activity.
5. Maintain a balance between one-way and two-way communication.
6. Create alternative paths through the workshop(s) to account for differences in interests, knowledge, and skills.
7. Try the "Luessenheide Maneuver" (named after the Counseling Center Director at UND, who suggested it). Start with a large group presentation, designed to introduce and stimulate interest in a topic. Follow it up with more focused sessions for those interested and able to go further with the topic (realizing that the large group session will have met the needs of some, even many, people). Next work with those individuals, in even smaller groups or one-on one, to go even farther, even to trying out and testing ideas or techniques learned (again realizing that others' needs will be met short of this kind of extension).
8. Provide opportunities in the session(s) to try out the ideas or skills being considered. If this is not possible, do it shortly thereafter, with an opportunity for people to regroup, at least with the session leader, to report results.
9. In writing workshops, provide plenty of "hands-on" experience. After reactions by fellow colleagues, have participants write and then rewrite. Also provide opportunities to critique student writing.
10. Make sure that participants leave with something concrete (knowledge, skills, techniques, written materials, references, an idea of "where to go from here").
11. Plan to do too little rather than too much in the time allotted for the activity. "Things always take longer than they do"—Murphy.

III. Evaluation: How well did it go?

1. Find out for yourself (and for anyone else who wants to know) how participants liked the activity and how much they learned

from it. Use simple questionnaires, interviews, or even observation of participants during the session(s).

IV. Follow-up: What difference did we make?

1. Try to determine how the knowledge and/or skill developed at the workshop has been used by participants.
2. Sometimes tie mini-grants to workshop participation. Either say, in advance, that a certain number (or all) of the participants would receive funding to try out what they learned. Or, after the session approach people who look like they could benefit from funding to continue.
3. Publish results. Either write short features for faculty newsletters or ask participants to write longer formal publication.

The faculty development directors at the following institutions are contributors to this list of suggestions: Augsburg College, Bethel College, Carleton College, College of St. Scholastica, College of St. Thomas, Dakota Wesleyan University, Minnesota State University System, Mount Marty College, North Dakota State University, Saint Olaf College, University of North Dakota. Any of them would welcome questions and discussions about planning seminars or workshops for faculties, or about the resource people who have contributed to their individual faculty development programs.