
Title	How can you plan a worthwhile workshop?
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Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 16(2), 127-141
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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How can You Plan a Worthwhile Workshop?

CLIVE B. KINGS

Preamble

The focus in this article is to help workshop leaders make better decisions about workshop preparation, design and follow-up. It is about the way in which the content of a workshop can be intergrated into teachers' practices so that it is relevant to their own students. There is no attempt to tell teachers about such organisational logistics as booking rooms and making catering arrangements since teachers are usually well versed in these matters. The importance of workshops lies in their contribution to human resource development.

How Do Workshops Contribute to Human Resource Development?

Human resource development is part of human resource management which evolved from a narrower concept of personnel management. Consider the contemporary view of human resource development functions as outlined by Mondy and Noe (1993):

Human resource development is planned continuous effort by management to improve employee competency levels and organisational performance through training, education and development programs.

Training includes those activities that serve to improve an individual's performance on a currently held job or one related to it.

Education consists of learning new knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable the employee to assume a new job involving different tasks at some future time.

Development involves learning oriented to both personal and organisational growth but is not restricted to a present or future job. (272,273)

Clearly workshops have the potential to contribute to each of the components of human resource development: the training, education and development of teachers. It is stressed that *education* may not only enable teachers to *assume a new job involving different tasks* (Mondy and Noe, 1993), but also help them do the same job differently and better.

There is a worldwide trend towards giving greater emphasis to on-the-job training, and in this regard school-based workshops have a major contribution to make to the ongoing personal and skill development of teachers. It should be remembered that teachers are very skilled and often have much knowledge and many ideas and skills to share with each other as they seek to engage in their joint endeavours to foster student learning. There is, of course, also a need for teachers to attend outside workshops provided that they are carefully tailored to meet the needs of individual school contexts. This involves a development process which is similar to the one outlined below.

What is a good workshop?

Workshops should be judged as effective if they are engaging for the participants, providing them with knowledge and skills appropriately tailored to meet their needs so that they can make use of them in their day-to-day classroom practice. In such workshops the participants will be critical thinkers doing hands-on activities which will be evaluated in terms of their future implementation in the participants' own contexts. Unfortunately for some participants a workshop is *perceived as good* if it is purely a passive experience and/ or an entertaining event, and for some participants a workshop is simply a painless short-term event to be knotted up on the *curriculum vitae*. We should recognise that there are always some participants who feel very threatened if they have to actively participate in a workshop since they prefer to remain passive listeners and observers, apparently preserving their omniscience in the eyes of others. In their view a workshop should be neither threatening nor burdensome but they should be adequately entertained so that the time passes easily. Passive participants will give such an unengaging workshop a high rating, and an even higher rating if they are given copious printed notes. They say 'Just tell me what to do so that I can

do it'. However, it is difficult to see how the connection can be made between telling and doing through such a limited approach.

From a teacher's point of view the primary aim of a good workshop should be to improve the learning of their students. However, an equally important secondary aim should be to contribute to the personal development of teachers.

To meet these aims a workshop should be appropriately pitched to the needs of teachers, be engaging for teachers, be contextually relevant and develop teachers' ideas, skills and horizons.

To fulfil these requirements a workshop should have a preparatory phase: ascertaining teachers' needs and marketing the workshop. The workshop itself should comprise a well integrated series of activities. In addition there should be a follow-up phase to facilitate the appropriate integration of ideas and skills into classroom practice. The workshop should result in enhancement of teachers' knowledge, skills and abilities.

Attention to some considerations for the improvement of workshop design can ensure that greater benefits accrue for the time, money and effort expended.

What Are Some Principles Underpinning Effective Workshop Planning?

Firstly we should consider some important principles that underpin planning an effective workshop. These principles include:

- accommodating the needs of teachers and their various concerns as well as the needs of the school: In essence the workshop plan depends on the teachers' previous knowledge and experiences as well as the needs of their students, their schools and the education system.
- acknowledging that teachers are adult learners and as such have much to contribute to any workshop from both their own teaching and their life experiences. The presenter is never alone in having expertise since the participants have much to contribute. Furthermore, as previously pointed out the participants also communicate to the leader a realistic perspective of the context for the subject at hand.

- ensuring that teachers have some ownership of the innovation that is the subject of the workshop presentation. It is only in such a case that teachers will want to adopt it because they feel they are a part of it and will have some control over it. Teachers will therefore be more likely to implement it effectively.
- considering a workshop within the context of a teacher's total experience. This would involve engaging in a preparatory phase before the workshop to ascertain participants' needs and concerns, consideration of the implications of implementation during the workshop and the application of knowledge and skills after the workshop, as well as engagement in an evaluation and post-workshop experiences.
- the marketing of a workshop. We should create a need in potential participants, indicating its relevance to them, so that they want to participate. Thus the lead-up time to the workshop is a critical phase during which potential participants should be contacted and provided with appropriate information to help them feel that the workshop might fulfil a particular need of their own.
- expecting the workshop participants to do what students will be expected to do in their learning environments. These actions include engaging in such things as teamwork as well as actually performing specific skills. Through such practical experiences they will be able to relate to the experiences of their own children and evaluate the implications for effective implementation.

Holistic Planning

The holistic planning phase is the most important since it takes an overall perspective of the events leading up to the workshop: assessment of teachers' needs and designing of the workshop, marketing of the workshop; the workshop itself; the evaluation and the follow-up activities. The phases of the workshop are all somewhat interdependent. Furthermore, one workshop cycle can give rise to another workshop cycle where each phase will be somewhat different and become integrated as part of the process of continuous improvement in schools. Thus workshops contribute to action learning (Revans, 1982; Kember and Kelley, 1993) which involves outlining a curriculum problem, designing ways to solve that problem,

implementing and testing these strategies, evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies, reflecting on the results, arriving at conclusions and identifying new strategies, amending and changing strategies and thus repeating the cycle several times to improve practice. From the workshop phases outlined it is apparent that they can be incorporated into action research cycles.

Holistic planning will involve all of the following phases of a workshop cycle: preparation - *determining needs*; design - *aims and objectives, selection of activities, finishing up a workshop, marketing, prior involvement of workshop participants, carrying out a workshop and following up a workshop*.

What Do We Need to Do to Prepare for a Workshop?

This phase of the workshop is the one that takes the most time and requires the greatest amount of effort and ingenuity. It provides the launching pad for a successful workshop. Before designing the workshop it is important to determine teachers' needs, draft a workshop outline, market it and then determine the levels of concerns of the participants and, where relevant, provide an activity prior to the workshop.

Determining the Needs

Some simple guidelines for the determination of needs must take account of both the external environment: the Ministry of Education requirements, the changing knowledge base, and the changing social, technological and economic environment, and the internal environment: the school, the teachers, the parents and the students. In other words we should evaluate the participants' needs against the backdrop of the external and internal environments (Graham and Kings, 1992).

The needs determined will influence two levels of decision-marking:

- the subject and focus of the workshop; and
- how the workshop might be shaped.

In this article the focus is on the shaping of the workshop, thus assuming that the workshop subject has been chosen.

It is important to recognise that teachers' felt needs may neither adequately reflect the environments nor the changes occurring in those environments. Changes are always occurring in the content of history, geography and economics as a result of wars and international cooperation. We need to ensure that a workshop is not unnecessarily limited by our own perception and well-rehearsed way of doing things while at the same time being in an acceptable framework. It would be easy to add to the following examples:

- a workshop on teaching of an aspect of mathematics should be influenced by greater availability of commercial audio-visual resources, computer software or the availability of a new computer laboratory.
- a workshop on science process skills should be influenced by an impending change of syllabus guidelines.
- a workshop on the community for social studies should be influenced by changes in legislation and government guidelines in Singapore, e.g. family values.
- a workshop on improving students' language abilities might include how commercial television might improve language learning, the latest research on parental support for language learning or the latest computer technology.

Once the topic for a workshop has been determined it is proposed that some or all of the following tasks be undertaken:

- Approach a group of teachers to determine their perceptions of needs. That is, their perceptions of what they need to know about *item analysis*, *cooperative learning* or whatever the topic is. Use of a structured discussion such as exemplified by the nominal group technique can be very productive.
- Use information from assessment procedures to determine strengths and areas for strengthening. This could apply, for example, to such things as *use of assessment techniques*, *analysis of students' examination results*, *analysis of students' notebooks and borrowing of library books*.

- Identify teachers' levels of concern. Hall and Loucks(1981) used six major levels of concern. In school it may be impractical, because of time constraints, to develop a full innovation configuration or pattern of levels of concerns. However, at a more simplistic level of analysis it is possible to determine the number of teachers who:
 - have no knowledge of the specific innovation;
 - have the skills to put the new ideas into practice;
 - have the skills to manage the implementation of the innovation;
 - collaborate with others in using the innovation; and
 - evaluate and modify the innovation.

We can ask participants to express their concerns, and/or probe a little more and ask a *few simple questions*. We can ascertain from the responses the particular needs of the workshop participants and these needs can then be used to shape the workshop design. Suppose the workshop is about *Writing Multiple-choice Items*. The responses to some questions might lead to different activities/designs for the workshop.

Question	Response	Implication for Workshop Design
Have you ever written your own multiple-choice questions?	Yes (8/10)	Ask participants to bring examples of their own questions with copies to share with four other people.
Have you ever written your own multiple-choice questions?	No (10/11)	Give teachers a sample of items to respond to prior to the workshop and ask them to develop guidelines.
Have you written higher order multiple-choice questions?	No (13/15)	Ask participants to bring examples of graphs, tables, pictures, maps, newspaper articles, audiotapes.....
Do you know how to do an item analysis?	No/Not sure (14)	Ask participants to bring a sample of items with students responses.

Another example may be that no teachers have used co-operative learning techniques. However, most have engaged students in group work, so they might be asked to clarify guidelines for the improvement of group work. There are many other examples and the workshop leader needs to be somewhat creative in developing good workshop ideas.

Prior Involvement of Workshop Participants

It is important to make decisions about the level of involvement of individuals prior to a workshop. The level of involvement will depend on such factors as the subject of the workshop, the levels of concern and the prior experiences of workshop participants. This could include such things as:

- ascertaining participants' levels of concerns about the topic, as previously mentioned;
- ascertaining participants' prior experiences;
- giving participants a short article to read with questions to respond to, or some other task, in preparation for a workshop discussion;
- asking selected participants to do a vignette, videoclip of classroom practice, or make records of classroom observations;
- asking participants to bring examples of students' work or other relevant information; and
- asking participants to prepare a model, example or problem for discussion at the workshop.

Any of these preparatory strategies will help prepare participants for a workshop and make them feel a part of it from the very beginning. They will also anticipate that their ideas are going to feature in the workshop.

Workshop Design

With all the groundwork done the design of the workshop should be specifically tailored to meet the needs of the participants. The objectives, the types of activities, the time line and any follow-up activities need to be considered.

What are the Aims and Objectives of the Workshop?

Before outlining the activities of the workshop it is imperative to outline the aim(s) and objectives for the participants. At the same time it is important to bear in mind what the objectives are for their charges, the learners. The objectives will provide the basis for selection of the workshop activities. The aim should be much more broadly focused whereas the objectives should be very specific. Some examples of aims are:

- To foster the improvement of English used in the school.
- To improve group discussion.

Some examples of objectives for different workshops might include:

To enhance the ability of teachers:

- *to identify barriers to students learning English.*
- *to develop a higher order multiple-choice items.*
- *to carry out an item analysis.*
- *to use teaching strategies to help students learn process skills.*
- *to design discussion group strategies that are more productive.*

What Activities Should be Used for the Workshop?

The activities of the workshop should:

- *be based on information collected from participants.*

It could be that many of the intending participants had not heard of co-operative learning. This means that some information needs to be given. However, it is not an excuse to give a tedious lecture that will bore the audience. It means that perhaps a basic information handout needs to be given at some stage, and not necessarily at the start of the workshop. Alternatively, it may be important to let participants engage in a group activity, but ensuring that the activity is properly debriefed.

Information received from potential participants may indicate that the focus should be how to improve management of co-operative learning. In such a case activities need to focus on management issues, for example, using teachers own classroom experiences or vignettes illustrating management strategies as discussion starters.

- *relate to the prescribed aims and objectives.*

For example, if the aim of the workshop is 'To improve the quality of group projects'; and the objectives included 'To identify the aims and objectives of a group project', 'To identify resources for group projects' and 'To allocate tasks to undertake a group project', then, rather than talking about doing this, it would be better to make the participants do it.

- *involve practical hands-on activities.*

To learn specific skills, for example how to carry out an item analysis of a multiple-choice test and to interpret the data, it is imperative that teachers actually carry out the process and not just hear about it. In this way it is possible that participants feel more confident to carry out those skills in the future.

- *include a variety of types of activities.*

It is important to consider a variety of activities for two reasons. Firstly, the attention spans of most participants are usually short. Secondly, different participants have different learning styles and may prefer some activities more than others. So changes of activities and the use of different approaches to activities are very important ways of keeping participants on task.

Variety will ensure that a range of knowledge, skills and pedagogical applications have been covered. Consider the following different types of activities:

- Leading a group discussion
- Reading an article and responding individually to questions.
- Using multiple-choice items for a group to devise guidelines for item writing.
- Discussing a teaching strategy based on a vignette developed in the school, or bringing groups of children to illustrate a range of teaching strategies.
- Simulation of students' group activities by teachers
- Marking a given essay, comparing scores, devising criteria, and justifying and defending criteria.
- Leading structured group discussions for purposes of evaluation.
- Devising a special program in groups.

It is essential that the activities shown above should lead to the development of real skills and to convey the real spirit of an idea. Going through a whole syllabus in a workshop is tedious. Teaching the approach and the skills involved in the syllabus is much more important.

- lead to meaningful outcomes in terms of enhancing student learning.

The focus of all workshops should be on the enhancement of student learning. The use of esoteric content or non-pedagogically-based activities should have no place in workshops.

How Should We Finish Up a Workshop?

There are many ways to finish a workshop. Three important actions are highlighted: receiving feedback from participants, identifying ongoing tasks and setting up support groups.

- 1 Get some quick feedback from participants.

What are three things you found useful and three things you would like to learn more about?

What do you intend to do with these ideas in your classroom?

It is of little consequence asking questions that yield information that cannot be used or asking questions about things that cannot be changed.

- 2 Negotiate ongoing tasks with participants.

- 3 In addition we should set up Support Groups.

Before completing the workshop it is of utmost importance to discuss the workshop follow-up phase, and to develop some support groups. This can apply within a school and /or between schools. Communication in the same school is clearly simpler. However, between schools we can use the telephone, teleconferencing facilities, bulletin board, electronic mail, facsimile machine as well as meeting from time to time. The support groups can fulfil a number of functions:

- *giving moral and professional mutual support;*
- *sharing experiences: identifying strengths and ways of improvement;*
- *dealing with special cases - children with learning disabilities;*

- *scrutinising new materials;*
- *sharing resources and suppliers;*
- *observing classes; and*
- *reinforcing skills.*

Clearly an important direction at a workshop is to ask teachers to report back at a workshop follow-up session.

Marketing

It is important to create in potential participants a wish to participate in the workshop. Sufficient information needs to be given to participants, but not too much. The information needs to be given to participants to give them the opportunity to manage their personal time and to prepare themselves for it. A small brochure would be useful. It should include such things as:

- *a meaningful title.*

Remember that a vague or trendy title may not convey very accurately what the workshop is about. A long title does not catch the mind's eye.

- *a rationale.*

A few sentences that clarify why the workshop is being offered and why it may be useful to you and how it will enhance the learning of students.

- *a broad aim.*
- *objectives.*
- *outcomes of the workshop.*

This should include details of exactly what it is that teachers will take away from the workshop with them. This could include such things as a technique, new knowledge, a design or management process, or a skill.

- *any preparatory activities.*

Workshop Implementation

We need to consider providing a simple programme with the aims and objectives, a list of activities, a list of handouts and annotated references.

It is always better to select a room which can be used flexibly, allowing small group work and whole group interaction. The use of groups can be an important vehicle for achieving the aims and objectives of the workshop. The way we structure groups can facilitate the development of effective outcomes. Assigning roles to group members is also a key feature, mirroring the expectations teachers should have of their own students doing group work.

How Will You Follow Up the Workshop?

consider how the workshop will be followed up. Decide whether there should be a follow-up activity, whether it should be an extension of the previous workshop with new material, or whether to build on the previous workshop and the work of the support groups. In the latter case reports or vignettes can be used, illustrations of students' work, ways of dealing with slower learners or some other dimension of the original workshop activity when considering programme refinement, evaluation and programme modification. Such a follow-up phase on the one hand encourages teachers to be more accountable and reflective about their practice. On the other hand it shows more concern for teachers than would be the case if the workshop theme were never mentioned again. It also shows genuine belief in the innovation and an understanding of the reality that there are no quick fixes. Such an approach is more likely to engender a higher level of teacher commitment in ensuring the effective implementation of any innovation.

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