

The Learning is in the Details

What's the Difference Between Experiential and Participatory Education?

Increasingly, trainers are inviting participants to take active roles in trainings, having keyed into the limits of a lecture-only approach. As the popularity of engaged training grows, all training approaches that aren't lecture can get lumped together. But when we look closely, we see that different non-lecture approaches actually have different learning results. That is, the learning is in the details!

Here's a closer look:

I recently had the chance to co-design and co-train with a facilitator who used a participatory education approach. With participatory training, the trainer often provides information or a tool and then invites the group to apply the information or tool to their home context. The training design steps here are 1) Presentation and 2) Application.

I come from a school of experiential education, a model that is rooted in the experience of workshop participants. In this model, the training design steps are 1) Experience, 2) Reflection, 3) Generalization, 4) Application.

Co-designing and co-training with a trainer from a different background helped clarify for me the differences between these two approaches and the unique strengths of experiential education.

Here's how:

In one section of our workshop we wanted to teach a tool for building leadership in an organization called the "Leadership Ladder." The designs that each of us brought to the table reflect the difference between a participatory and an experiential approach.

Participatory Design

PRESENTATION

- *Facilitator explains a Leadership Ladder*
 - "This group's power comes from the people participating in our organization. If we want to grow our organization in people and want to grow our people in skills, we need two things: 1) points of entry for new people that are clear 2) roles that people can take on as they becoming more and more sophisticated about our campaign."
 - "A Leadership Ladder is a tool that helps us track opportunities for people to plug into our organization and move into increasingly skilled or risky roles."
- *Facilitator gives example of Leadership Ladder*
 - "Here is an example of a Leadership Ladder."

- (Walk through handout).

APPLICATION

- *Facilitator invites participants to apply the tool to their home context*
 - “Now that you see how a Leadership Ladder works, I’d like you to go ahead pair up to create a draft Leadership Ladder for this organization.”
 - (Pass out worksheet).

Experiential Design

EXPERIENCE

- *Facilitator invites participants to remember their roles in their organization*
 - “We’re going to take some time to think about how we can build a stronger organization.”
 - “I’d like to invite you to close your eyes and think back to when you first got involved in this group.... What was happening in the county then? What were you and your neighbors facing? And I want you to think in particular about how you first got involved and what role you took on—so maybe you had a house meeting with your neighbors or started to post things online—what was your first role? And then I want you to think through the next several weeks or months, getting increasingly involved—and I want you to think about what other things you did, what other roles you took on.... And now I want you to zoom ahead to today and the roles you have now in this group.” (This happens slowly).

REFLECTION

- *Facilitator invites participants to reflect on their roles*
 - “How was that?”
 - “What did it feel like to remember all those roles you’ve had?”
 - (Facilitator follows reflection threads a bit so participants are remembering what those experiences were like).
- *Facilitator invites participants to name some of their roles (go around)*
 - “Excellent. So let’s go ahead and hear from everyone about two roles they had in the group.”
 - *As participants list off roles (posting online, tabling, door knocking, planning fundraiser, etc.) facilitator captures them in increasing level of skill and risk.*

GENERALIZATION

- *Facilitator invites group to notice characteristics about the list*
 - “So what do you notice about this list?”
 - (Facilitator follows generalization threads a bit so participants are getting clear about what’s on the list, what its characteristics are).
- *Facilitator introduces Leadership Ladder tool*
 - “There is an organizing tool for the thing we’ve just created. It’s called a Leadership Ladder.”

APPLICATION

- *Facilitator invites participants to apply the tool to their home context*
 - “Now that you see how a Leadership Ladder works--and that you’ve moved through one yourself--I’d like you to go ahead pair up to create the Leadership Ladder for this organization.”

So what's in the difference?

I sat down with fellow trainer Zein Nakhoda to answer this question.

Both of these designs get to the same place—that is, they both leave the participants with a draft Leadership Ladder for their group. **The difference though for participants and trainers is significant both in terms of what participants learn but also in terms of what learning is made available. Here's what we mean:**

What learning sticks?

Because experiential education creates opportunities for participants to engage a subject through many channels--experience, emotion, intellect (vs. intellect only)--the concepts stick with participants more deeply after the training. For example, in the experiential design above, participants were invited to remember their own story (experience), reflect on that story (emotion), and use that story as a part of a theoretical framework for how leaders develop (intellect). This sets participants up to more fully integrate their learning.

With experiential education we are also starting with how people are already looking at things--as opposed to some external reality. This makes it easier for people to internalize and connect a "new" concept with their own way of acting and viewing the world. The participatory approach asks people to try out some other way of thinking, but when the tool is over they often merely revert back to their old way of working. Using experience as a starting point makes for stronger, more robust integration--and increases the likelihood people will actually use the skills after the workshop is over.

Whose knowledge are we utilizing and honoring?

Participatory education reinforces to participants that the expertise is with the trainer only: the trainer provides information and participants are to absorb it. In this model, the design implies to participants that there is one "right" way to execute a skill and that other people, besides themselves, know that "right" way. Of course, we as trainers have learning goals for the group and real expertise in a subject matter. But when we lift up the experience and knowledge of workshop participants we assist the group to build their own sense of power and ability in themselves--which is deeply important for changemakers.

How do participants keep learning after the training?

Experiential education doesn't only teach content, it also teaches participants how we learn. When participants figure out that they can be a resource to themselves, they can reflect, generalize, and apply lessons from their own experiences inside or outside of a formal training context. This sets participants up to not only make use of the lessons from the training, but also to become more adept learners in their daily lives. Now that's empowerment!

What learning is available in the group?

For the trainer, an experiential approach increases possibilities for "emergent design," or adjusting to issues, challenges, and growth edges that are live in the group. By drawing out stories and experiences from participants, the facilitator gets a closer read on participants' existing

knowledge of the content and dynamics under the surface that might limit learning so they can adjust the training design accordingly. In short, experimental designs allow facilitators to meet participants where they are at, maximizing the learning that is available in the room.

How does the learning resonate culturally?

Our diverse cultural and social contexts mean that participants and facilitators might use different words and terms to mean the same thing. When we listen to participant stories in their own words, we can pick up on tools and terms that resonate with them. For example, Zein was doing a door-knocking training where one of the lessons was to “adjust your rap for different people on the doors.” He asked participants what works when they go door-knocking. One participant said, “catching the beat.” The rest of the room hummed in agreement. The concept that the participant keyed in on was the same as a lesson Zein was aiming to teach, and by eliciting the lesson from the participant he could work with the term that resonated with the group in their cultural context.

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