

What Makes an Effective Trainer?

Aims:

To consider the attributes of a competent trainer using experiential learning methods

To provide an opportunity for self-assessment as a trainer

Resources required:

Plenary room and small group discussion areas; flipchart and OHP

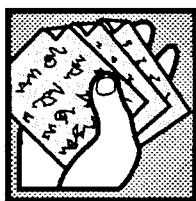
3.1 'Effective trainers' OHP transparency

3.2 'Some common characteristics amongst effective trainers' handout

4.1 'What makes an Effective Trainer?' exercise : participants' instruction sheets

'Learning log' sheets

1 Background notes



Many people approaching the role of trainer for the first time do so with considerable apprehension. They experience fear about their ability to 'perform' as a trainer in front of other people. Some doubt they have anything to offer which could be appreciated by the participants. Others are nervous about a role which places them in charge of a training event where participants may have high expectations.

The strongest influence on most people coming to the training role will be their own experience of trainers who have 'trained' them in other contexts. For some trainers, this could be their experience of teachers and tutors in school or college. People with a longer work record will refer back to their experience of any in-service training they have received. These experiences may have been good, bad or indifferent – but they will colour the way in which the individual perceives herself as a trainer.

With a group who have little experience as trainers, it can be useful to ask people to discuss their memories of their own earlier formal learning in order to draw out their expectations of a 'good' trainer or teacher.

These recollections are likely to draw out several significant issues, possibly including:

- the degree of formality in the teaching;
- the extent to which the tutor exercised control;
- whether participants could explore interesting side issues;
- how the trainer was regarded by the participants; and
- whether the trainer could ever be diverted from the topic.

These and other memories all serve to influence us in our view of what makes a good and effective trainer.

The requirements of a trainer using experiential learning methods differ from those using more traditional teaching methods. Referring back to Chapter 2 on experiential learning should demonstrate some of the differences. The role of the trainer in experiential learning includes:

- acting as an enabler of learning rather than a provider of knowledge;
- encouraging open enquiry rather than closed information amongst participants;
- providing participants with opportunities for self-discovery;
- validating and reinforcing participants' own insights and learning; and
- asking questions rather than providing answers.

The relevance of adopting this type of role is emphasised in training within the field of personal social services compared to several other professional service areas. Within in-service training there is relatively less content relating to firm facts and specific instructions to be learnt, and more emphasis on skill enhancement and understanding of issues. Training for staff in the public and voluntary sectors is focused on inter-personal skills and awareness of relevant issues. For example, during a training course for staff preparing to work with people infected by the HIV virus, there is likely to be only a limited amount of information to be conveyed relating to the virus and its transmission routes; far more attention is likely to be paid in the course to raising staff awareness of their own prejudices and feelings in such a sensitive area, and providing them with responsive and supportive ways of approaching people living with HIV.

Since this training course should itself reflect the principles of experiential learning, participants should be assisted to reach an awareness about the role of the trainer themselves. The exercise which follows (4.1) is one simple way of doing this.

Participants are being asked 'what makes a good experiential trainer?' Are there a set of attributes to be encouraged or skills to be taught which will improve the ability of the trainer to work in this way?

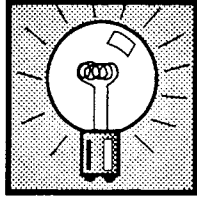
It is our experience that there are no pre-set requirements for an effective experiential trainer. There are no specific skills which, if acquired, will ensure the trainer succeeds in the role. There is no magic bag of tricks possessed only by good trainers.

In responding to the fears, anxieties and nervousness of developing trainers regarding their role, it is important to challenge and if possible remove the myths about trainers having to perform at some special standard. By emulating someone else, or adopting an unnatural attitude, the trainer is more likely to fail. False behaviours and attitudes definitely do not make for effective trainers no matter how well the behaviour or attitude works for someone else.

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What we have observed though, is that effective trainers all seem to demonstrate certain common characteristics. It is doubtful whether these can be 'taught' or 'trained'. More likely, they develop as trainers gain in confidence and their own experience of the role. We suggest these characteristics of a 'good trainer' (3.1 and 3.2) not as the correct answer to the exercise, but as a comparative contribution to it.

2 Suggestions for using these materials



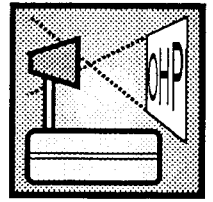
- 1 Outline the aims of the session and introduce it.
- 2 Introduce group discussion on participants' previous experience of good and bad teachers, trainers and tutors (see 'Background notes' section 2).
- 3 Introduce and distribute 'What makes an Effective Trainer?' exercise (4.1).
- 4 Lead discussion on the insights derived from this exercise.
- 5 Use OHP transparency 3.1 'Effective trainers' to highlight some common points and support this with handout 3.2 'Some common characteristics amongst effective experiential trainers'.
- 6 Distribute 'Learning log' sheets for completion by participants.
- 7 Close the session with a review of its aims and learning points.

The purpose of this chapter is for participants to consider the attributes of a good trainer. We do not believe that good trainers conform to any model. Indeed, a large part of this section is concerned with challenging the myth that trainers are special or different. In doing so, we suggest that the tutor's key role is to validate and confirm the successful styles already adopted by the developing trainers.

This chapter relies on a brainstorming exercise to produce most of the material for discussion by participants. The contribution from the tutor is best restricted to a brief introduction, placing the material in context, and comparative material and arguments from the 'Background notes' (2). These may be introduced best after the brainstorm exercise (4.1) has succeeded in raising the issues.

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3.1 OHP Transparency

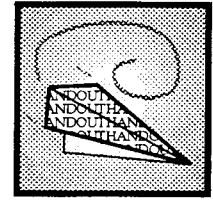
Effective trainers:

- are authentic
- know and use their own strengths and weaknesses
- avoid dependency by empowering learners
- are prepared but always open to change
- think on their feet

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3.2 Handout

Some common characteristics amongst effective experiential trainers



Effective trainers are authentic

This is a characteristic which is self-evident and yet not obvious. The good trainer acts and behaves in a similar and natural way when working as a trainer and when doing other things. Whilst it is possible to view the trainer as a performer when he or she is training, this is not an act. The trainer does not contrive a particular attitude or set of behaviours when in the training role. Participants experience the trainer-as-performer the same as the trainer-as-a-human-being. The trainer maintains a consistent honesty and absolute integrity whether she is training or not. The trainer uses her natural skills and abilities in an authentic way.

Effective trainers know and use their own strengths and weaknesses

Being authentic, the trainer can use the inherent honesty and integrity to draw on her strengths and admit to any weaknesses. In devising training programmes, the trainer is likely to be more effective if the programme is structured to draw upon her particular skills. Thus a good counsellor may use this technique to help course participants struggling with an issue. A trainer who has little personal knowledge of a topic raised in discussion will freely admit to this limitation and invite participants to contribute from their experience of the matter whilst ensuring that the learning points are made clear.

Effective trainers avoid dependency by empowering learners

An important characteristics of good trainers is that they do not see themselves as the source of learning. They may have particular knowledge, ability or experience, but they see their role as enabling the training participants to discover and accept this learning for themselves. If the trainer is allowed to become the fount of knowledge, she creates a dependency in which the learners must return to her for more or repeated tutoring. This does not skill the learner but reinforces the trainer in a position of power through the information she alone has access to. The notion of empowerment expresses the idea that the trainer's task is to lead participants to the point where they have the confidence and ability to use the learning for themselves.

Effective trainers are prepared but always open to change

All training courses require advance preparation. The good trainer will ensure that she knows the desired outcomes and the expectations of the participants; the trainer will be familiar with the practical arrangements

and time constraints. Above all, the trainer will have prepared a course programme, input material, handouts and exercises which are appropriate for the anticipated course. And yet, even the best made plans can go astray, and the competent trainer is prepared to judge the moment when the planned content should be suspended or discarded and some other more pressing issue dealt with. Such changes are necessary in many circumstances: the participants may be less prepared than anticipated; they may be resistant to part of the programme; there may be conflicts between participants which inhibit learning. These and many other situations require change on the part of the trainer and the effective trainer recognises this and deals with it.

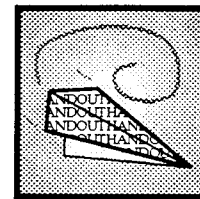
Effective trainers 'think on their feet'

This characteristic develops with confidence but is commonly found amongst those trainers who are quickly responsive to the ever changing needs of a training programme. No matter how well planned, there are always moments of uncertainty in any training programme. How the trainer deals with this uncertainty is what counts. If the programme is not working, how can it be improved on the spot?; what to do if people are unwilling to engage in an exercise?; how to make a constructive response to issues and topics contributed from participants and not known in advance? These dilemmas are what make a training event live and valuable. To respond, the trainer needs to be able to live with the uncertainty and risk of not always knowing what is coming next. The trainer can only do this if she has the confidence and ability as expressed here to 'think on her feet' – to deal with issues as they arise and then move on. Thinking on your feet involves being prepared to take risks.

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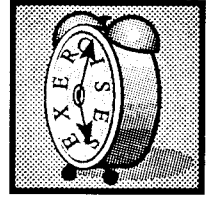
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CHAPTER 7:**4.1 Exercise : trainer's notes****'What makes an 'Effective Trainer?'****Purpose:**

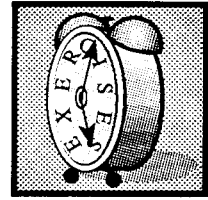
To reflect on the characteristics of an effective trainer.

To complete a self-assessment of personal training characteristics.

Process:

- 1 Introduce the purpose of the exercise.
- 2 Distribute sheet 1 to participants working in small groups.
- 3 After 20 minutes, ask each small group to contribute their findings to the whole group.
- 4 Distribute sheet 2 to participants working on their own for them to assess their own training effectiveness.

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CHAPTER 7 :**4.1 Exercise : participants' instruction sheet 1****'What makes an Effective Trainer?'**

Working in small groups of four people, draw up a list of all the characteristics which you think an effective trainer using experiential learning methods should use. Think about your learning experiences on other courses, at school or in college. Try to remember any tutors or trainers who have impressed you (and also those who were least effective): what made them so good (or bad)? At this stage take and note down all the ideas proposed: do not debate or reject any of the suggestions.

After five minutes, or when the ideas start to dry up, consider the full list you have made. Which of these are you agreed about? Where there is disagreement, try to reach a consensus.

Now, still as a small group, select and prioritise the five most important characteristics from your small group's agreed list. Write these up on a flipchart sheet.

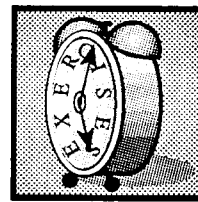
Compare your group's sheet with those from other small groups, and with any suggestions from the trainer.

What conclusions do you reach about the characteristics of an effective trainer?

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4.1 Exercise : participants' instruction sheet 2

'What makes an Effective Trainer?'

Working on your own, write down in the spaces below, the five characteristics which you think are most important for an effective trainer. Then using the scale provided, consider and mark your own self-assessment of the extent to which you currently possess this characteristic in your practice as a trainer.

1.

ineffective _____ highly effective

2.

ineffective _____ highly effective

3.

ineffective _____ highly effective

4.

ineffective _____ highly effective

5.

ineffective _____ highly effective

Now pair up with another participant and share the self-assessment of your own training effectiveness on these five characteristics. Consider how you can best use your strengths and what action you might take to improve your effectiveness in other areas.