

Observation Practicum  
ADED4F06 - Facilitating Adult Learning  
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Assignment #3 - part 2  
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November 15, 2007

Observation Practicum

*Contextual and Background Information:*

As part of my teaching practicum, I had the opportunity to observe an array of adult training methods and instructional styles during the three-day, twenty hour conflict resolution workshop delivered by the Mediation Center Southeastern Ontario (MCSO) at Kingston 26-28 October 2007.

Permission to conduct the teaching method research practicum was granted by MCSO, the individual instructors, and the participants. All were provided with a document summarizing the research objectives and Brock University's commitment to confidentiality and privacy. No objections were raised, interest in the project was expressed.

MCSO is a small training organization specializing in alternate dispute resolution skills including mediation, negotiation, conflict diagnosis and coaching. MCSO is committed to advancing the field of effective conflict resolution through the provision of effective, high quality, focused, training, and conflict resolution services to business, industry, and individuals. MCSO professionals are experienced practitioners, and trainers. Most have more than twenty years of experience and bring diverse skills and perspectives from a wide range of professional backgrounds including; law, education, conflict resolution, mediation, business, and Olympic sport. The apparent age range is approximately forty to seventy, and the gender representation appears to be fairly equally divided.

MCSO delivers its training at the Donald Gordon Center (DGC), Queen's University Executive Development Center. This state-of-the-art facility is a trainer's and an adult learner's dream facility. The principal training room used by MCSO is a small amphitheater equipped with unrestricted sightlines, excellent acoustics, lighting and ventilation, comfortable seating, and a projection booth supported by on-site technical assistance. The adjacent breakout rooms are comfortable and well-equipped, complete with natural lighting, all necessary supplies, tools and whiteboards. In addition, sumptuous noonday meals and refreshment breaks are provided by the DGC. Overnight accommodation is available at DGC for out-of-town participants. This aesthetically pleasing and comfortable training environment is well received by MCSO participants.

MCSO trainers exhibit a variety of teaching methods and styles. Their 'social reform perspective' (Pratt, 2005) is evident in the learning objectives and their passion and for the content presented. A combination of individual and team teaching is used effectively to deliver content, engage learners, maintain the fast pace of the exercises, and discussion. Commitment to adult learning principles, in particular, creating and maintaining a safe place to learn and question, relevancy and utility of content and materials, active participation, and respect for the individual and their life experiences is clearly demonstrated by the trainers through their instructional design and in their subsequent learning facilitation.

The three-day, twenty-hour training workshops consist of a series of specific modules, which vary in length and content. Day one and two are core content, day three consists of a variety of special-interest workshops which the participants select according to their particular need. The fast-paced, learning outcomes focused training is supported by the provision of extensive reference material for post-workshop follow-up learning. Adult learning techniques such as role plays and the effective use of multi-media quickly engage the learners in their learning, and maintain energy levels throughout the intense training modules and the full twenty-hour workshop.

The overall instructional design is constructivist, and is sequenced from the known to the unknown. Unknown to known sequencing is used strategically in some initial role plays to create disequilibrium in and among the participants in order to generate and accelerate very rich and learning outcome focused discussion in small group and in plenary. Respecting the value of participants' time, at the outset of the workshop and all modules, the agenda and learning outcomes originally provided in the marketing materials, are re-presented and discussed. They are customized for the particular cohort, based on the needs assessment. Check-ins occur at the beginning, during, and at the end of each module to confirm understanding, to address questions and to confirm that the learners' needs are being met.

Consistently, the participants attending these three day weekend training workshops are keenly interested in the subject, and are actively involved in managing their learning and professional development. Demographic composition and professional profiles of the learning groups change with each course.

In this particular cohort, twenty-five participated on the Friday and Saturday, thirty-five participated in the Sunday modules. The cohort came from a variety of backgrounds; HR administrators, managers, lawyers, paralegals, psychologists, teachers, and ministers. Some of the participants were semi-retired, some expressed interest in becoming Ontario Court Roster Mediators. The age group appeared to be thirty to fifty-five, with concentration in the thirty-five to forty-five age group. The gender mix was approximately eighty percent female, and twenty percent male. The cultural mix appeared to be primarily Western European heritage, with limited visible racial diversity amongst the cohort. Customization of the agenda and learning outcomes beyond the pre-printed materials, in order to meet the needs of the specific cohort, was not apparently required.\

### *The Impact of the Physical & Technological Setting on the Learning Experience*

The executive learning center setting supported by contemporary technology is effectively designed to support adult learning and is luxuriously comfortable. Participants new to MCSO are openly impressed and appreciative of the high-quality environment. For many, an executive learning setting is a new experience. Returning participants comment that they have looked forward to returning to this luxurious setting, and to the high caliber instruction and stimulation that MCSO provides.

The sumptuous noonday meal is a service particularly appreciated by the female participants. Early afternoon digestion-induced lethargy is overcome or offset to a significant degree by instructional design. The application of active learning techniques, in particular the use of role plays, small group exercises, and the physical movement between breakout rooms and the amphitheater keeps participants mentally alert and physically engaged and energized.

### *Motivational Strategies and Observed Learner Response*

These time-constrained professionals are critical consumers of learning products and services. Having personally evaluated and selected this training as relevant to their needs, they are highly motivated to achieve their learning objectives and a significant return on their investment. Consequently, individually and collectively, participants tend to respect their co-learners, adhere to the agenda, and focus on time, task and tools throughout the modules and workshop.

A variety of motivational strategies were used effectively. Learner's expectations were managed through the provision of a clearly stated workshop structure and learning objectives, as part of the marketing materials, the pre-reading material, at the beginning of each training day and module, and finally through customization for the relevance of a particular cohort. Check-ins at the beginning of each training day and training module, provided a formative evaluation (Fenwick & Parsons, 2000) for the continuing relevance and utility of the module for individuals and for each cohort. A safe learning environment was created and maintained, in which participants could "play" while applying the knowledge and learning new skills. Participants were encouraged to expand their network of professional contacts from among the participants. Active learning techniques (Siberman, 1998), included small group work, role plays, discussion, feedback, and games. Questions were encouraged, and personal attention was provided to the extent possible within the time and resource constraints. Discussions were actively managed and encouraged through small group work with follow-up in plenary. Fast-paced, role plays in small groups were followed by discussion guided by learning outcome based questions. Synchronizing nodes (Rothwell, & Kazans, 1988) were provided by plenary discussion, and deliberate "check-in's" by the module facilitators. Participants were encouraged to "play" and flesh out their role based on the character outlines provided, while testing out their new knowledge and skills. A summative evaluation of the learning experience (Rossi, Friedman, & Lipsey, 1999) is conducted via the requirement to submit post-workshop, a short paper reflecting on aspects of the training that were particularly meaningful and useful to the participants and their professional practice.

Participants became actively engaged in the role plays, losing track of the time limits set. The subsequent post-role play discussion groups were highly energized with lots of good-natured joking and laughter within small groups and in plenary. Content-rich, post-role play analysis discussions tended to exceed the time allotted and spilled over into coffee breaks and lunch hour. Respecting their commitment to time task and tools, coffee breaks tended to be a quick or consumed in the classroom.

I observed budding thespians, creative interpretation of roles, and high levels of energy and learner engagement throughout the role plays. In follow-up discussions, participants spoke of their enjoyment and engagement in the exercises even though they may have previously abhorred role-plays.

This learning format was fast-paced and energetic. Learners remained visibly alert and actively engaged throughout the day. By three p.m. of day three, while discussions remained active and laughter was still present, learners demonstrated lower levels of energy and engagement.

In observing the wrap-up exercises and pre-departure networking discussions, it was clearly evident that the participants were happily tired out from three days of learning and stimulation. There was a common theme of clear statements that individual's learning objectives had been met and that they had received full value for their investment.

## References

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- Rossi, P.H., Freeman, H.E., & Lipsey, M.W. (1999). *Evaluation, a systematic approach, sixth edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Rothwell, W.J., & Kazanas, H.C. (1998). *Mastering the instructional design process, a systematic approach, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.
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