

Building Rapport with Learners

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One point to remember when designing activities and planning your delivery strategy is that some learners may be uncomfortable being a focal point in your workshop. This could create challenges if you call upon them to role-play or ask them to share ideas and information, be a small group leader, or read material to others. Their reluctance may be due to their cultural background. For example, some people in Hispanic, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures teach children to respect their teacher and those who are older or from a higher social class and not to question or challenge them. Their hesitation might also be due to their personality style or because they are more introverted versus extroverted. Because of learner comfort level, you may have to rethink activities, session format and overall structure of the content and delivery.

Another factor to consider related to building rapport is that some learners generally need to build a comfort level with you and their peers before they participate in certain activities or become actively involved. Based on personality style and the degree of trust that they have for you and trainers in general, it may be difficult for some to feel at ease early in a workshop. Because of this, it is probably a bad idea to schedule a role-play or learner presentation early in a workshop if people do not know one another well. To help speed the comfort level among learners, many trainers and educators use icebreaker activities early in their sessions so that participants can start to get to know one another. They also use various verbal and non-verbal strategies, such as greeting learners, using their names, smiling, shaking their hands, and other interpersonal techniques to build early rapport and relax learners.

One approach to learning success is to create a “safe environment” by telling participants in your opening remarks that it is okay for them to “opt out” of a volunteer role, such as small group leader or note taker, or when asked their opinion. To limit the number of times that they may choose not to participate, explain the importance of their input and ideas and encourage their involvement.

In order to encourage sharing of ideas by everyone, build in a variety of activity formats in order to give learners a chance to participate at their level of comfort. For example, build in large group question and answer (Q&A) and activities, but also use small-group activities in which four to six learners work together on a task. The latter allows a more intimate setting and many learners who are uncomfortable in large group settings will open up in the smaller ones.

An option for getting input from all learners is to have them write down ideas or questions on paper or 3X5 cards and either pass them in anonymously or put them into a pile. Each sheet or card can then be selected and read for discussion or comment by the entire group. This allows shy people and those who are reluctant to challenge the instructor an opportunity to voice their question, idea, or concern.

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