



Participant Centred Education

For over 20 years, the Workers Health and Safety Centre (WHSC) has embraced a participant centred learning approach. By “participant centred” we mean two things.

- 1 the information content grows out of the expressed needs of participants and**
- 2 the techniques used to convey this content actively involve participants in the process of learning.**

This approach grew out of our roots as a labour-oriented training centre with a strong conviction that workers have a right to know about health and safety hazards and their legal rights so they can protect themselves in the workplace. Workers also need health and safety education to participate effectively in workplace health and safety matters — on joint health and safety committees, for example.

While reflecting our labour origins, our educational approach is also grounded in the principles of good adult education. For example, research tells us that adults learn best when their experience is recognized. Our approach respects and values this experience and seeks to incorporate it into the learning process.

Meeting the Needs

Participant centred education is at the heart of WHSC’s educational philosophy. It begins with an acknowl-

Ours is not education for education’s sake, but education that is focused on changing the workplace to prevent injuries and occupational disease.

This is why we develop objectives that detail actions needed for workplace change.

edgement that course participants are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with information, but have their own experience of the world. We know that participants have first hand experience of the workplace — they have intimate knowledge of workplace hazards and very often, good ideas for solutions. As the ones who suffer the consequences when hazards are left unchecked, they have a vested interest in their own health and safety. They are “motivated” to learn.

We know from the study of adult education that adults learn best when they can see immediate value in what they are learning. WHSC incorporates this principle by equipping participants with information not just for the sake of the information itself, but so that it can be applied in a practical sense to improve health and safety conditions in the workplace.

For these reasons, course content must reflect the expressed needs of the participants, both in terms of the overall objective of the course and the learning objectives or body of content that support the achievement of this objective. WHSC works hard to ensure educational needs are met through the use of various consultation processes, program advisory committees, research and evaluations.

Participant Centred Education ... cont'd

Forming the course content in accordance with the needs of participants is not enough, however. WHSC recognizes that the educational techniques of the course must also support participant centred learning. To accomplish this, WHSC uses worker instructors who themselves have a vast knowledge of workplace issues.

Workers or peer instructors facilitate learning using a “worker to worker” rather than “top down” approach which ensures material is conveyed in an appropriate way and one that is readily accepted by learners.

Throughout the course, instructors employ a variety of techniques intended to draw out practical workplace examples and applications to reveal common patterns which can then be further explored and investigated. Sessions are designed to allow participants to apply what is learned to their own workplace.

Not Your Run of the Mill Health and Safety Course

Participant centred education can perhaps best be understood by comparing it with traditional methods. Traditional approaches use a top-down model in which learning is viewed as a process of transferring knowledge from experts to those who lack it. In contrast, participant centred education is based on the principle that each person has a reservoir of valid experience to contribute. Inclusive, it holds that through the process of sharing and critically evaluating this collective experience, better solutions will emerge. The learning atmosphere is one of respect that recognizes diversity as a resource that can enrich everyone.

Traditional approaches tend to develop course content in isolation from learners. They also rely on passive methods such as lecturers aimed at teaching workers to



adopt safe behaviours or follow the “safety rules” devised by others. The problem with this approach is that workplace health and safety improvements are rarely controlled by individual workers in isolation; the overall conditions of the workplace must be taken into account.

In contrast, participant centred methods develop the learner’s capacity for critical thinking. This capacity can then be applied to workplace problems. Throughout the learning process, participants build the ability to question, critically examine, challenge, make decisions and collectively solve problems. This means critically evaluating hazards on the ground and taking action such as reporting unsafe conditions, securing proper labels or material safety data sheets, determining the proper procedures to be followed when dealing with hazardous substances, or refusing unsafe work when necessary.

TRADITIONAL METHODS

- learners are empty vessels
- instructor imparts knowledge
- inconvenient questions may be ignored
- favours passive techniques such as lectures.

PARTICIPANT CENTRED METHODS

- ⇒ learners come with valid experience
- ⇒ instructor facilitates discussion, sharing of experience and provides framework to build on participants’ knowledge
- ⇒ encourages questioning and critical thinking
- ⇒ uses active techniques such as small group work and problem solving.

How it Works

Good participant centred education engages learners by:

- ✓ **drawing out the experience and knowledge of participants**
- ✓ **adding new information and linking it to what people already know**
- ✓ **linking what has been learned to actions that can be taken or skills that can be practiced.**

In WHSC courses, participants have the opportunity to draw upon their own experience of the workplace and to refine and clarify their own thinking as well as build and apply basic concepts. This is accomplished through small group work, “brainstorming” and question posing by the facilitator.

Working collaboratively, learners share experiences and analyze workplace hazards as well as barriers to change. In this way, they gain not only knowledge but also confidence and organizational skills that can be applied to situations in their own workplace.

This method also equips participants to pursue further knowledge and strategies in the future. Instead of lecturers, instructors become facilitators of class discussions and learn along with the class.

While short lectures and presentations have a necessary role in bringing forward information that participants need, good educational design uses a variety of methods to accommodate different learning styles and maintain interest in the subject matter. In each case, the method chosen compliments the topic being discussed. Here are a few examples:

- problem posing through active lectures to help elucidate issues and patterns
- practicing new skills such as body mapping in discussions about health effects of workplace hazards
- hazard mapping to help determine the locations of hazards
- developing and using surveys or questionnaires to gain additional information about health and safety hazards or health effects
- developing or adapting checklists for use in workplace inspections or job hazard analyses
- analyzing case studies to gain practice in applying concepts
- working in small groups to problem solve or develop strategies for action
- assessing and organizing health and safety information
- role playing to practice talking about issues and help learners bridge the gap between the classroom and real life
- hands on practice with measuring devices as well as various pieces of legislation
- using audiovisuals as thought provoking triggers for the discussion of issues
- creating or analyzing elements of health and safety programs
- evaluating different types of hazard controls
- researching, reporting and making presentations.

Conclusion

Built on our experience of the past and sound adult education principles, WHSC’s participant centred education recognizes that adults learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process. To attain the greatest impact in learning, WHSC strives to ensure that its courses meet the needs of participants and are designed in a way that offers as much active participation as possible.



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