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**Ellen McIntyre**

PhD, is Associate Professor, Primary Health Care Research and Information Service, Department of General Practice, Flinders University, South Australia. ellen.mcintyre@flinders.edu.au.

Tracy Reibel

PhD, is an Adjunct Research Fellow, University of Western Australia.

Paul Aylward

BA(Hons), MA(Ed), PGCE, MA, is Lecturer, Discipline of General Practice, University of Adelaide, South Australia.

How to conduct effective skill building workshops

Skill building workshops need to be successful learning events that provide value for money. The strategies in this article are based on a review of the literature and evaluations received from workshop participants who have attended the many workshops conducted as part of the Primary Health Care Research Evaluation and Development (PHCRED) strategy.

■ **Workshops to build both research and clinical skills are popular learning events in primary health care. They are cost effective compared with individual training activities and use the principles of teaching through active engagement of participants.^{1,2} Workshops provide a means of connecting the material to be learned to the learners' context, as well as providing opportunities for group interaction.**

Although the literature has demonstrated that well planned workshops offer mainly positive outcomes for participants, the durability of workshop outcomes is rarely evaluated. Outcomes are usually presented within the context of immediate – rather than long term – benefits.¹

Planning the workshop

It is important that workshops are tailored toward the needs and expectations of participants, and that delivery methods and engagement strategies are appropriate, meaningful, relevant and stimulating.

Participant expectations can be shaped through prior promotion and clarification, and prior knowledge of the particular group attending can help presenters ensure the content is appropriate. Where possible, presenters should aim to gain insight into the backgrounds of participants (occupation, previous experience and cultural background) and seek advice from a key group member (often the agency requesting the workshop) about the best approach.

Particular attention should be given to ensuring cultural appropriateness where workshops are to be delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culturally and linguistically diverse groups (see *Resources*).

Develop clear objectives and outcomes

Clearly state the objectives and outcomes of the workshop so that potential participants can decide whether the workshop will be suitable for their needs.

Invite knowledgeable presenters

Select presenters who are well informed, have well developed ideas, are effective presenters and can stimulate discussion. Ask presenters to provide practical applications to illustrate key points. Stories and examples are prompts for remembering main points and can demystify jargon and key concepts.

Bring in fresh faces for longer workshops. Brief presenters on the type of audience they can expect (eg. whether there may be more advanced participants, or a mixed group with very different perspectives, or a particular participant who might be disruptive). Provide presenters with guidelines regarding Powerpoint presentations (see *Resources*) and arrange computer and audiovisual equipment as needed.

Balance the program

Structure the workshop so that there is an appropriate balance of small group and large group work, theory and practice, and presentations and participation, with adequate time to put the learning in perspective.

Remember to build in refreshment breaks to encourage networking among participants. Outline the workshop time structure at the beginning of the workshop. You may wish to organise a facilitator to introduce presenters, monitor the time and manage the program.

Provide materials to enhance learning

Organise brief pre-workshop reading and provide handouts of presentations and any other resources at the beginning of the workshop.

Organise a suitable venue

Select a venue that is easy to access, has a room that is large enough for participants to be seated around tables, and has an area for registration and refreshments.

Phyllis Lau

PhD, is Research Fellow and Project Coordinator, Primary Care Research Unit, Department of General Practice, The University of Melbourne Victoria.

Jacque Schroeder

BSc, is State Coordinator, NSW Primary Health Care Research Capacity Building Program, Centre for Primary Health Care and Equity, The University of New South Wales.

Denise Schultz

is State Coordinator, Qld Primary Health Care Research Evaluation and Development Strategy, Discipline of General Practice, The University of Queensland.

Promote to the right audience

Plan a promotional strategy that focuses on your target audience and gives them enough time to plan their attendance. Where necessary, organise and advertise continuing education points for health professionals.

Supply name tags and contact details

Supply participants with name tags to make it easier to strike up conversations with other participants. Providing participants agree, organise a participant list with contact details so that participants can contact each other after the workshop.

During the workshop

Introductions and housekeeping

Acknowledge the traditional owners of the land by holding either an 'acknowledgment of country' or 'welcome to country' (see *Resources*).

Provide an overview of the workshop and information about the presenters. When introducing participants to each other, ask them to include something about themselves that is pertinent to the workshop topic. Provide 'housekeeping' information and rules of etiquette to ensure a smooth running workshop. It may help to provide a running program for the facilitator and presenters.

Participation and discussion

Encourage everyone to participate, and facilitate discussion to avoid anyone dominating the process. This can be a particular concern when there are participants with different levels of skills.

Support constructive small group discussion by using thought provoking, prompting or trigger questions. Ask participants to share experiences that can reinforce concepts, but keep discussion focussed on the objectives of the workshop.

Allow enough time for small group and whole group discussions. At the end of each small group discussion, request that someone from each group briefly summarise the key points raised. Provide constructive criticism, positive feedback and reassurance where appropriate. Follow up on a one-on-one basis (during break times or at completion of workshop) when issues are pertinent to just one person.

The facilitator should summarise the key points at the end of the workshop and check that objectives have been met.

Evaluate the workshop

The most common form of evaluation involves participants completing a questionnaire. This should be as concise as possible and include some

'open ended' questions to allow participants to express their views or expand upon 'closed' question answers where they wish.

Ask participants to evaluate the appropriateness and convenience of the venue, the timing of the workshop and the pace of delivery, the style and clarity of the presentation, and the usefulness of activities and resources employed. Evaluation should also address the 'topic' specific objectives of the workshop.

Respondents should include some information about their professional background so that their feedback can be interpreted. Recording contact information on the questionnaire will facilitate follow up work.

After the workshop

Thank participants and offer them a small incentive (a fun or tasty reward) to encourage them to complete their evaluation. Provide any further references and resources referred to during the workshop.

A debriefing session with workshop organisers and presenters can provide useful information on how to improve the next workshop. Provide presenters with a summary of the evaluation and follow up on matters as promised. Thank the presenters and others involved in making the workshop a success.

Resources

- Cultural appropriateness: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – www.aiatsis.gov.au
- Cultural appropriateness: culturally and linguistically diverse groups – www.diversityatwork.com.au.
- National, regional and local Aboriginal Land Councils for advice on acknowledging traditional owners – www.abc.net.au/message/proper/contact_community.htm
- Primary Health Care Research & Information Service. PHC RIS infobytes: how to present your work. – www.phcris.org.au/publications/infobytes/howto/present_work.php.

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2. Farrell M, Ryan S, Langrick B. 'Breaking bad news' within a paediatric setting: an evaluation report of a collaborative education workshop to support health professionals. *J Adv Nurs* 2001;36:765–75.