
Reviews

edited by Philip Barker

A. Barker and F. Manji, *Writing for Change – An Interactive Guide to Effective Writing, Writing for Science, Writing for Advocacy, CD-ROM and Users Guide*, Fahama/International Development Research Centre, Oxford, 2000. ISBN: 0-9536-9021-0, no price given. Softback (28 pages) and CD-ROM.

This is not a book; the package consists of a CD-ROM and a users' guide.

The user guide consists of a 28-page A5 format brochure. It gives an overview (4 pages) of the contents of the CD-Rom and how it can assist in the writing process in three main sections: core skills, writing for science and writing for advocacy. Within each of these subsections more detail is provided, with the authors giving a short introductory aim for each task and the expected outcomes.

There then follows a page of instructions on how to run the CD-ROM with details of how to open the accompanying 'notebook' for making notes and observations.

The next six pages suggest that the package can be used in four main ways: as a resource for self-managed learning; as a resource for group-based learning; as a reference tool to help when you need it; and as a framework for running a training workshop or programme.

The remainder of the booklet outlines how to incorporate the package into a training workshop (eight pages) and provide information about the sponsors and publishers of the package.

The CD-ROM can be entered using the guidance given in the booklet. It is clearly labelled and laid out to show a complete overview of all the menus and sub-menus available.

When entering the menus and their sub-menus most of the information is provided as straight text, with the occasional suggestion that the 'notebook' feature be activated to allow the user to practise writing a statement.

I was unable to find any part of the CD-ROM that I would consider interactive. Interactive means that the programme and the user 'talk' to each other, or provide a dialogue which is in response to something one does and the other adds to or modifies or comments on. In this sense this package cannot claim to be interactive, as this does not occur.

As this aspect was disappointing, the CD-ROM information would have been more effectively delivered by using a large workbook with gapped areas and an index with suggestions and possible answers to problems. It would also be portable and of use wherever the learner chose to study.

I would not recommend the use of this package to any of my students who wish to improve their writing skills. This type of product is desperately needed and I am disappointed that the package title seemed to have addressed the need, only to find the contents did not live up to these claims.

Anne Brown
Heriot Watt University

Paul Z. Jackson, *58½ Ways to Improve in Training*, Gower, Aldershot, 2000. ISBN 0-566-08313-2. Hardback, xviii + 135 pages, £49.50.

Have you ever felt that you needed an injection of bright ideas for ice-breakers, activities to get your workshop off to the right start, ideas to turn a difficult group of people into a team or just a change from your usual activities? Well Paul Jackson's book might well solve your problems.

This is a book with 58½ different ideas on how to energize the group creating so-called 'Impro Energy' – a current which runs between participants. The activities are described in a way which allows/encourages modification or tweaking to suit your particular situation or objective. This is a book for your bookshelf to be dipped into regularly.

The structure and guidance given are clear. The activities are grouped according to their type/objective, for example, 'emotions and attitudes; scenarios'. The introduction shows where each of the activities fits into a 'visual, verbal and physical triangle' to enable you to choose from the activities which most closely address your objectives. In addition, there is a 'key' for each activity which explains in a quick visual representation how each activity is rated using the following criteria:

Participants – range of numbers of people who can be engaged.

Time – in minutes (I suspect the minimum of time required).

Energy – amount of physical exertion needed by participants (scale of 0–5).

Individual/team – is there more personal or group benefit (scale of 0–5).

Visual/verbal/physical – each of these characteristics gets a rating from 0 to 5.

Further guidance is given on how to make the activity work by giving very explicit instructions. This means that even the novice trainer can make very positive use of the book, but the more experienced trainer can adapt and adopt at will. The information supplied for each activity covers:

'The trainer says' – this can be used verbatim if required.

'Bell' – to prompt an end or change of activity.

'Side-coach' – encouragement or further instructions required.

'Debrief' – questions to prompt reflection.

'Variations' – suggestions and developments.

'Equipment' – anything needed, although most activities do not require props.

Having assimilated the guidelines and the way the book is presented, it is then a case of leafing through for general inspiration or going to the section which contains the activities most relevant to your objective. The benefit of this book is the way in which the physical activity is related to the learning opportunities it generates. These paragraphs should encourage the trainer to use the activities to enhance their training sessions.

Each section contains about seven or eight separate activities. The instructions and information relating to each activity never exceed two pages and often take less than one page. Each activity is introduced with a paragraph describing its essence and its expected outcomes. The instructions are followed by the 'debrief' section in which there are prompts to help the trainer get the participants to reflect on the activity and explore the feelings, opportunities or thoughts it has generated. Sometimes, on the other hand, the debrief prompts a discussion around the activity and the objectives of the workshop, meeting or training event.

Section 1 aims to 'Alert and Energize' between 2 and 100 people in about five minutes. The names of the individual activities conjure up lovely scenes: 'Shark Island', 'Target Bluff' and 'Ping Pong'. They are all fast moving activities in a verbal or physical sense and should leave the group alert and ready to receive the training.

Section 2 entitled 'Working Together' obviously contains team-oriented activities. Participants' group sizes vary from 6–100 to 2–13 and length of time needed from 5 to 60 minutes. The hour-long activity 'Team Pix' is about how a group sees itself working together. The options for individual variation are clear, as are the range of times when such an activity would be appropriate. Other activities have purposes such as 'exploring and extending levels of energy, creativity and trust' and 'a physical warm-up'.

'Influencing Relationships' is the overarching purpose of activities in Section 3. A range of individual to team-based activities, include some visual, some verbal and some physical. A group of three related activities, 'Silent Focus', 'Noisy Focus' and 'Focus Complete', examine the

concept of give and take and may be appropriate when embarking on a workshop/training session which may involve these sentiments. Again activities can engage from 4 to 100 participants from 5 to 25 minutes.

Section 4 on 'Resources' interprets this term quite widely – from things in your pocket, to yourself, your achievements, shared abilities and inhibitions. The activities require participants to engage and thereby reveal information about themselves. These activities tend to be visual or verbal rather than physical and can involve 2–100 participants for between 5 and 40 minutes.

Activities surrounding 'Emotions and Attitudes' (Section 5) cover team and individual strengths, but again are largely visual or verbal. They engage 3–100 participants for 5–60 minutes. The activities seek to raise individuals' awareness of, and reaction to, their emotions. One of the games, 'Intensity Statements', explores the impact of expressing everyday statements at variable levels of intensity. These activities have their own special opportunities for use where the group and the facilitator are likely to feel happy with this type of activity. The 'Appreciation Chain' activity should please most staff developers as it encourages positive feedback to all participants individually.

Section 6 is entitled 'Improvisation Activities'. Ranging from 20 to 40 minutes' duration for 3–90 participants, these encourage team creation and development and require participants to explore their feelings after completing the activity. This chapter brings to mind the TV programme of improvisation called *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, which always leaves me feeling exhausted at the participants' energy and enthusiasm levels.

Section 7 is about 'creativity' and develops in complexity from Section 6. Creativity can have visual, verbal or physical focus. Some of the activities are quite brief (10 minutes) while others last as long as 50 minutes and again the numbers of participants can range from 2 to 60. Audience participation plays a part in several of

these activities, allowing the benefits of the exercise to be looked at from different angles. The activities range from 'making a badge to represent ...' through to writing and performing sixteen-line plays.

The last full chapter is group activities under the heading 'Wisdom'. Have we reached this informed stage by working our way through the book? From 1 to 100 participants can take from 10 minutes to 50 minutes to do the activities which focus on learning from previous experience, either pre-workshop, from the workshop or from the activity itself. Can you imagine what you might learn from getting a group to count from 1 to 20 with only one person speaking at a time and always going back to the beginning if two people speak simultaneously? Learning from these activities is both individually and team-focused.

This is a book that needs to be put into practice to test its credibility. However, the way it is set out, the clear indication of what you might expect to gain from an activity, how many people you can engage for how long and with what level of physical or mental activity means that it is down to you as the trainer/facilitator to make it work. It seems that anyone can give the instructions but the skill is in choosing the right activity for your situation and using the debrief in a constructive way. The combination of the trainer personality and the group characteristics coupled with time available and numbers of participants will rule out some activities for each occasion but the recipe book is on the shelf, inviting readers to follow word for word or providing inspiration. Improvisation is the name of Jackson's game so you need to be open to the excitement this offers. This book certainly makes me want to get out there to try some of these activities.

The ½ is a 'shameless plug' for another of Jackson's books which he claims will allow you to run effective training sessions from planning to debrief – reading for another day.

Alison Holmes
The Open University