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How I Design a Workshop

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Outline

- Incremental change is the name of the ed dev game.
- Workshops and lectures have different characteristics.
- Planning a workshop almost always requires iteration.
- Don't forget about community building in your workshops!
- Use incredibly clear instructions.
- Highlight the answers that align best with your goals.
- Consider what participants are leaving with.
- Prepare, prepare, prepare.
- Reflection can be super useful.
- Facilitation tips.

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Incremental change is the name of the ed dev game.

The work of educational development is incremental.

So, as I'm designing workshops, I don't aim for participants to change their entire worldviews, or to become exactly like me. I aim for participants to consider other ways of thinking about and doing teaching.

Even if my workshops don't go as planned, if participants left with a more open mind, or a new friend, or a resource, or a frame of reference, it was a success.

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Workshops and lectures have different characteristics.

Workshop

- Mostly bi- or omni-directional, from facilitator to participants, participants to facilitator, and participants to participants
- Participants are active much of the time
- Questions are posed from facilitator to participants, often throughout
- Goals are predetermined, but specific information/content adapts to group
- Participants often leave with some product, worksheet, etc

Lecture

- Mostly uni-directional, from presenter to listener
- Listeners are mostly passive
- Questions mostly posed from listener to presenter, often at the end
- Information/content is predetermined
- Listeners may leave empty-handed

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Planning a workshop almost always requires iteration.

Use backward design!

- Start with the goals
  - What do you want your participants walking away knowing, wondering, questioning?
- Consider how you'll assess these goals
  - What evidence will you have that participants learned/grappled with your intended topics?
- Generate activities that connect to useful assessment of your goals
  - What activities will get your participants thinking and doing?

Iterate! As you discuss and practice, your goals might change!

Don't forget about community building in your workshops!

It's difficult to work together when we're thrown together with no introduction.

Consider using an ice-breaker activity or a warm-up activity that gets participants talking, writing, moving, sharing, early on in the session.

- If you talk for the first 20 minutes and then ask them to share, it will feel different than if you get them talking within the first ten minutes of them being there!
- These can be meta! These can be relevant to the topic! These can be goofy! (I am 100% cringe/earnest and it works.)
- Can your icebreaker double as attendance-taking?

Consider what norms you'll set. Will they be co-created? How explicitly will you convey them? How will you make everyone feel welcomed and valued?

Use incredibly clear instructions.

You only have the participants in one room, one time for 60-90 minutes. There is not a lot of time for getting confused, and you can't rely on them knowing how you typically do things.

- Instead of, "What is active learning?" you might try "Share two characteristics of active learning."
- Instead of, "Have a discussion in your group." you might try, "In your small group, decide on a reporter who will share your findings out with the large group. When we reconvene in the large group, I'll ask each small group to share one challenge you experienced while answering this question."
- Instead of, "Answer these questions in your group." you might try, "In your small group, discuss questions 1-3. We will reconvene in 7 minutes (at 10:55) and I'll give you a 1-minute warning. Make sure to write something down so you can share out with the large group."

Highlight the answers that align best with your goals.

When you listen in on small groups, you can hear the answers they're providing and note down who said what great thing in response to which prompt.

When you return to the large group, you can say, "These were all great conversations, and I got to listen in on some really fantastic answers."

Then, when you want to highlight certain answers, you can say, "I heard X group discussing Y challenge. Can you share about how Z thing relates to Y?"

- If you just ask groups to rehash their conversation, they may feel weird simply repeating the previous discussion. Asking them a question that allows them to expand on their discussion, or highlighting a piece of their answer can deepen the conversation.
  - For example, if a group writes on the board, you can highlight one of the points they shared and ask them to "say more" about that one particular point. This is often an easier entry than just asking groups to rehash.
  - Another option is to have participants share about the discussion they had: "What was one idea you all agreed on? What was difficult about coming to a consensus?"

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Consider what participants are leaving with.

- Can you give them a handout that summarizes the relevant points?
- Does the worksheet provide them with concrete strategies?
- Do they have a contact to reach out to or follow up with?
- Do they know where to go to find other workshops/sessions?
- Do participants know they can reach out for an observation?
- Do participants know they can reach out for consultations?

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Prepare, prepare, prepare.

I like to over prepare. I like to have a back up plan, and a back up to my back up.

- What if 5 people show up? What if 50 people show up?
- What if you get derailed and you are 20 minutes behind schedule?
- What if the tech doesn't work?

I like to prepare estimates of how long every activity will take, with my goals for each activity written out clearly, like a lesson plan. Some information is predetermined, most depends on what the group says.

Try the activities out yourself first.

- What kinds of answers are you looking for? Sometimes we make really cool activities that don't actually do what we want.
- Consider how someone might misinterpret your question. How can this activity go wrong?
- What questions might you get from the audience? What would you still be curious about?

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Reflection can be super useful.

During the session, you can write things on your lesson plan (timing, answers, how things felt).

After the fact, you can reflect on your goals. Did your activities achieve the goals you hoped to achieve?

You can use a survey to get participant reflections. (Here are sample questions I use.)

Facilitation tips.

You do not need to respond to every single comment. In fact, if you can get participants talking to each other, that might feel cool. Imagine volleyball rather than tennis.

When in doubt, you can open the question to the group, or ask the participant to "say more." This can buy you time if you're not sure what to say. You don't need to perform expertise. Again, volleyball not tennis.

Have a bystander intervention strategy at the ready. What will you say if someone says something racist/sexist/homophobic/ableist/transphobic, etc? (You can try the oops/ouch method.)

Silence is your friend. (I like to announce at the top of the session how much I love awkward silences because that's where we do good thinking and learning. Participants know that I will be patient and wait, so people often fill the silence with their questions, ultimately reducing silence.)

Less is more. Trying to do 3 breakout groups in one hour will likely feel chaotic. Consider embracing slowness and reflection.