

## Regional training in learner-centred pedagogy skills for policy influencers

— Bogota, 29 October to 2 November, 2012

The Evidence-Informed Policy Making Programme (EIPM) of the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) developed and ran a training programme to build the training skills of a selected group of Latin American and Caribbean policy influencers so that they would be better able to train policy makers in EIPM related topics. Individuals who are in the position to train policy makers in Latin America and the Caribbean were invited to apply for the training programme via an online application form. Fifteen participants were selected. These included professional trainers, members and staff of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), staff of policy making institutions, researchers and teachers of academic institutions, and academic librarians.

The programme consists of three phases. In the pre-workshop phase, selected participants are asked to write an open reflective essay focusing on their past experience in teaching and learning processes. The participants are then brought together for a five day workshop focusing on EIPM and training techniques. Following the workshop, participants are expected to use some or all of the taught contents in their own training activity. The facilitators aimed to facilitate the training in order to provide the participants with learner-centred training approaches. Throughout the workshop, participants were given the opportunity to practice what they had learnt by developing and delivering training sessions.

This training report was prepared to review the main objectives of the training and sums up the topics and techniques covered during the sessions.

### Session 1: Negotiation and definition of the objectives of the training workshop

Prior to the workshop, the facilitators agreed on the objectives outlined below. By the end of the workshop participants should have increased their:

- intellectual and practical tools to make training activities more learner-centred and engaging
- confidence when delivering training
- ability (and motivation) to plan their own training
- understanding of the importance of reflection
- ability to solicit feedback from training participants and use them in a interactive way to adapt the training to the trainees needs

- awareness of the importance of evaluating ex-post how your training objectives have been reached
- strategies for dealing with participants' behaviour
- awareness of the intellectual and technical debate around issues of EIPM

On the first day, participants were asked to write their own objectives on post-it notes. These were then matched to the facilitators' objectives displayed on a flipchart page. Most objectives identified by the participants matched to the facilitators'. Following the discussion, one objective was added to the original list. This was:

- The opportunity to network and learn from each other's experience

One of the main objectives of discussing and negotiating the objectives with the participants is to agree a common agenda and avoid misunderstandings and misleading expectations.

### Sessions 2 & 3: Evidence-informed policy making

During the first session, the participants discussed how EIPM can be defined conceptually and in practice in their working context.

A key discussion point was that having public policies that are informed by research-evidence is not the same as achieving policy influence with a given piece of research. The former describes a demand-driven process where 'users' of research have the skills to find, understand, assess and use research-evidence to inform decision making. The latter refers to a supply-driven model where a research producer or intermediary succeeds in influencing policy decisions based on one or more research study.

During the second session, problem tree analysis was applied to investigate the core issue that public policy making is often not informed by research-evidence. Having identified some main barriers to EIPM, the participants considered which of these barriers could be overcome through training activities. There was a general agreement that many barriers to research use – such as nepotism, party politics and perverse incentives – could not be overcome by using training activities. However, it was also recognised that such issues need to be considered and understood by trainers of policy makers. On the other hand, issues related to lack of capacity of policy makers to understand research-evidence could be addressed also by training activities.

A key learning from these sessions is that training activities could play a key role in supporting evidence-informed policy making but it is also important to recognise that they are not a panacea.

## Sessions 4 & 5: Understanding learning

Understanding learning was broken down into one session on learning theories and one session on learning styles.

In the first of these sessions, participants were introduced to some major learning theories and were taught how these relate to each other. Behaviourism emphasises the use of positive and negative feedback to enhance learning. A criticism of this approach is that it treats learners as ‘empty vessels’ who are not motivated to learn for themselves. There was general agreement in the group that this approach may be appropriate for learning ‘habits’ or repetitive actions but it is not useful to build critical thinking skills. Cognitivism arose as a reaction to behaviourism and emphasises ‘higher’ forms of learning. Cognitivists recognised that individuals are motivated to learn by far more than rewards and punishments. They advocated for problem solving activities to promote learning. Constructivism is a branch of cognitivism which posits that individuals learn best when they ‘co-construct’ their own knowledge. The constructivist trainer facilitates the construction of knowledge by acknowledging the wealth of experiences and through questioning elicits the gaps in their knowledge. In other words, the trainer co-constructs the ‘new’ knowledge on the trainees’ existing knowledge and asks them to consider how this knowledge alters their perception on approaches to their current life experiences.

The main objective of the second session was to demonstrate that, contrary to popular belief, individuals do not have one specific ‘learning style’ and that everyone learns in a variety of ways. The most appropriate ‘teaching style’ is then more related to topic than individual. However, even for the same topic, there may be preferred learning styles within a class of trainees. An interesting debate during this session was on the difficulty (impossibility) to build training sessions that can match with all the participants to one session. What emerged was also that, whatever teaching style is planned for an activity, the trainer must feel comfortable with it.

Closing the sessions on understanding learning, the participants were divided in groups and delivered training sessions adopting different teaching styles in order to practice themselves and involve the rest of the participants.

## Sessions 6-9: Training in practice

The following sessions of the training concerned a range of practical issues that are faced by the facilitators when delivering training activities.

### Dealing with participant behaviour

During this session, participants were introduced to a variety of techniques to help them manage participants’ behaviour.

The first part of the session was on pacification of the room layout before the training begins in a way that facilitates participation of trainees and limits the possibilities for distraction. Participants discussed pros and cons of different room layouts. A key learning from this debate is that no one size fits all and different room layout serves different purposes.

During the second part of the session, participants practised using different techniques to deal with questions from the audience. These were answering immediately, pausing before answering, pausing and walking before answering, and deflecting back the question to the audience. Discussion then was facilitated on advantages and drawbacks of these different techniques – someone highlighted that pausing before answering a question not only gives time to think, but also the impression that the facilitator is taking the question seriously; on the other hand, the opinions on deflecting the question were heterogeneous in the room; some participants highlighted that deflecting the question could give the participants the impression that the facilitator is not well prepared on the subject.

Finally, participants discussed and practised effective strategies for dealing with some particularly challenging behaviour – such as the ‘dominator’, the ‘misguided expert’, the ‘quiet mice’ and the ‘saboteur’.

### PowerPoint

The aim of this session was to prevent participants from causing ‘death by boring PowerPoint slides’. Participants reflected on the role of the slides – they are not for the facilitator to read out, but to use as supportive tools to help the participants to understand the facilitation.

### Needs Assessment

In this session, the difference between needs and wants was discussed. In particular, using the imaginary example of Prof. B. Oring (A. Burrido), a key point recognised by most of the participants is that if you ask people what they need, they will often answer what they want, simply because it is possible that they do not know what they need. Participants then agreed that objective assessment tools may be required in order to measure participants’ real needs. On the other hand, it is also very important to know what participants want, since this will help in managing the expectations and negotiating the objectives of the training.

### Monitoring and Evaluation of training activities

Continuous evaluation (before, during and after the training) has a paramount role in shaping the trainers’ approach and increasing participants’ satisfaction.

In this session, participants discussed, in particular, the difference between formative and summative evaluation. The former, is the process of testing participants’ understanding and mood in order to continuously adapt our content and ways of communication to participants’ current needs; the

latter, is an evaluation ex post of how the training objectives (or expected outcomes) were reached by the participants.

## Reflective practice

According to Kolb's learning cycle, reflection is an integral part of the learning process. To facilitate reflection, participants were asked to keep a reflective journal throughout the workshop to record how they felt about what they were learning and how they intended to make use of it. The reflective journals, together with the preliminary reflective essays, will be integral to the evaluation of how effectively the workshop influenced the participants' learning process.

In addition to writing a preliminary reflective essay and journals, participants were encouraged to reflect throughout the sessions of the workshop.

## Participant training sessions

Participants also had the opportunity to practice their training skills both during group sessions and a final individual training session.

The first occasion for group sessions was the aforementioned session on learning styles. A second opportunity was delivering training using and adapting existing training material. During this session, participants customised the materials they were given and made their session learner-centred.

On the final day, each participant led a 15 minute training session on an EIPM-related topic. This task was introduced on day one to give participants time to prepare. Following this final session, participants were given feedback from each other and the facilitators using a feedback form.

## Reflections and recommendations

INASP is fully committed to learn what works in planning, delivering and re-shaping activities. In line with this mission, reflection of the lead facilitators associated and a review of the final feedback form brought out some recommendations that should inform the planning and facilitation of similar training activities in the future.

## The selection process

The selection process played a key role in gathering the right group of participants in the same room during the one week training workshop. The selection process resulted in a balanced group that brought different but equally enriching experiences and were able to critically review and discuss each session. The responsibility of the facilitators is to lead the discussion by applying small changes to plans where useful, but not lose focus of the main objectives established at the beginning. It is believed that a competitive selection process, including a rigorous scoring system to rank applicants, is a useful tool to select the right participants.

## Discussion and negotiation of learning objectives

The statement, discussion and negotiation of the learning objectives are crucial to have participants that are committed during the delivery of the whole training. Having the learning objectives agreed and clear at the beginning of the workshop will help the facilitators to follow a logical lesson plan and support the participants step by step in their learning process. It should be considered by the organisers to explicitly share the learning objectives before the first session, so that participants will have more time to reflect and discuss on them.

## Practice sessions

Having dedicated sessions in which participants can practice what is discussed during the theoretical sessions is of paramount importance — especially when facilitating a workshop for experienced participants. In order to make this experience relevant and effective, the practice sessions should simulate the participants' professional context — although this can be difficult when participants come from different organisations and cultural contexts.

## Reflection

Asking the participants to reflect before and during training (also by means of reflective essays) is a useful practice. For the facilitators, it gives a preliminary overview of the background and expectations of participants. For the participants, it allows reflection on their previous practice/attitude/knowledge and how the training workshop will impact their actions in the future.

## Group formation and dynamics

One practical group exercise divided the participants in four groups according to their self-perceived level of active participation during the training — the proxy for participation has been defined as propensity to make spoken interventions during the training. This exercise is based on the concept that people perform better when working with those that share a similar communicative style. This exercise was discussed in the final session when participants openly debated on the real effectiveness of such an activity. The opinions ranged from people feeling indifferent, to people who actively benefitted and others who felt labelled in a negative way. It is believed that the open discussion of such an exercise will help the participants to understand the reflective value of it. On the other hand, a careful introduction of the aim and the literature supporting such an exercise is recommended to avoid misunderstanding.

The aforementioned are the main reflections and recommendations coming from the ongoing evaluation and reflection of the facilitators and revision of the final feedback forms.

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