Lets have a conversation about the ROLES OF TRAINERS in an active learning environment

What does it mean to be a **TRAINER** in a course? A trainer in the adult education environment we work with can have many roles. Some of the roles are more related to management and identification of training needs, as we have seen in the previous sessions of this course. Not all trainers will be involved in these parts of the training plan, as it depends on the institutional attributions of your job. But there is one role that all trainers will have: **the role of supporting learning.**

Earlier in this course we have discussed the benefits of planning for active learning and the activities that can help promoting it. Using student-centred approaches, where learners are placed at the core of the teaching/learning experience, offers greater opportunities for interaction between trainers and learners, learners and peers, and also learners and the content to be learned.

But what is meant by “interaction between trainers and learners” and how can this interaction benefit both: learner and trainer to make the whole learning experience effective and memorable?

We would like you to watch the following video. The first 4 minutes are the most important parts we will refer to, but you are welcome to watch it all if you like it. To access the video, please follow the link below:

Looking at the relationship between the role of “Leader” and “Follower” in this dance video, can you think of similarities that can be applied to the roles of “Trainers” and “Learners”? The relationship between how people ‘lead’ and how those they are working with ‘learn’ shows that these roles are not mutually exclusive. In ‘leading’ one is also ‘learning’.

Similarly in training, the trainer (leading the training experience) is also learning by constantly observing the learners and responding to their learning needs. This aspect of learning from our students has already been mentioned by colleagues attending this course. It is this interplay between leading the training and learning from the observation of learners that usually provides the best insights in the kind of support individual learners need. It is this insight that enables the trainer to facilitate learning.

When delivering a course that is student-centred the trainer can facilitate learning by providing:

- Academic support – working with learner's cognitive needs in learning, or in a word: teaching;
- Non-academic support – working with learner's organisational and emotional issues around learning.

In practice these forms of support are not always very distinct. For example, if you read the messages posted in the "Facilitators' Gym", you may like to decide if you can tell in which area of support each of those issues might fall into.

The challenges described in the "Facilitators' Gym" may not happen to a trainer all in one single course, but if (or when) they happen, the trainer will need to be able to respond to the issues. There are some qualities and skills in a trainers' practice that can really help when supporting learners, not only in challenging situations, but on a daily basis. Successful support to learners are most often observed when trainers are:

Approachable - In other words, trainers should be friendly when contacted by learners and when contacting them. There should be no real sense of hierarchy in adult training.

Able to listen constructively, helping students to clarify their concerns without interrupting unnecessarily or taking over the whole conversation.

Open and accepting of other people's values and ways of thinking.

Honest about what you (as trainer) can and cannot do to help, or know and do not know about the subject; besides of course, being sufficiently prepared so that students can have confidence on you and your knowledge of the subject.

Non-judgemental (outside the formal assessment system, of course) and able to find ways of expressing your views without being critical of someone directly. In other words, it is important to be able to criticise someone's approach to a learning exercise, for example, without criticising them personally.

Empathic - especially able to understand how people from different backgrounds to your own might feel about being a learner.

As it is possible to see from the qualities mentioned above, supporting learners has a lot to do with observing, respecting and reacting to each particular learner's need. Hey! Again, this is very similar to "dancing with a partner", don't you think?

On the other hand, when thinking of learners (and we must think about them, because they are the centre of training as we are addressing here) one aspect that needs to be seriously

considered is diversity. The training activities most of us are getting involved with now (or may intend to in the near future) break the regional boundaries and are set in an international environment. This means the learners we train are a mixture of individuals, and the range of factors that contribute to this diverse mix is wide. To mention but a few factors, learners in our groups vary in gender, ethnicity, native language, faith, age and confidence. As trainers, we create and maintain a language and communication context in our groups, modelling and shaping what terms and expectations are acceptable. Additionally, part of our work is to assist in the creation of learning communities with culturally diverse people, and this requires us to "maximise sensitivity and minimise insensitivity". There is an interesting list of "cultural competencies" mentioned in a book by Mikel Hogan (2012), which is really helpful in finding ways to "maximise sensitivity and minimise insensitivity". The list is included below for reference:

14 Cultural Competencies*

1 - Be non-judgemental/withhold judgement
Short circuit, unplug, or otherwise disable the common tendency to judge negatively others you perceive as different.

2 - Be flexible
Interactions may take longer when communicating with someone whose first language is not the official language of the course, or when working with an interpreter.

3 - Be resourceful
Promptly obtain the necessary information and articles you will need to respond effectively to any given situation.

4 - Personalise observations
Express your personal thoughts, ideas and beliefs appropriately in order to show another person that you care about them as one fellow human being to another.

5 - Pay attention to thoughts and feelings
Take your own thoughts and feelings seriously, keep in touch with your internal reactions to the people with whom you verbally interact.

6 - Listen carefully

7 - Observe attentively
Attentive listening and careful observation serve to increase one's sensitivity to the 'whole message', not just the words, but the message beyond the words.

8 - Assume complexity
Recognise in an ongoing way that in a culturally diverse population diverse perspectives and outcomes remain multiple in nature – basically there are no easy formulas or answers.

9 - Tolerate the stress of uncertainty
Powerful emotions of fear, stress, anxiety and frustration need to be acknowledged when they arise and be addressed directly.

* Hogan, M. (2012). The Four Skills of Cultural Diversity Competence: A Process for Understanding and Practice, 4th edition, Broadman and Holman Publishers.

10 - Have patience
One must practise remaining calm while, at the same time continuing steadily through challenging situations.
11 - Manage personal bias and stereotypes
Make the effort to grow beyond your personal viewpoint in order to treat people with whom you interact respectfully, as individuals, and with full acknowledgement that no one person typifies an entire group.
12 - Keep a sense of humour
Learn to laugh with others rather than at others.
13 - Show respect
Go out of your way to express genuinely, the understanding, humour and esteem that you continually cultivate for the persons with whom you work.
14 - Show empathy
Experience the other person's perspectives, feelings, beliefs and attitudes as if they were your own. Put yourself in others' shoes. Empathy is critical in a culturally diverse encounter.

Considering the cultural competencies above certainly helps to build a good working relationship with learners, some of whom may have had negative experiences of learning. Affective influences, which refer to feelings, emotions, attitudes and motives, have an impact on the learning process. Keep in mind that learners possess a broad range of experiences of education, and their feelings about their studies may have been forged by the extent to which they were engaged, motivated and included in learning processes at school, college, university and in their working environment. Those with negative experiences of learning may have been inadvertently excluded from learning activities because the methods employed were not accessible to them, or in some way incompatible with their personal strengths.

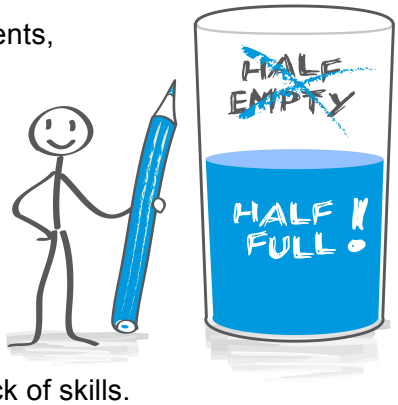
For some students, assessment in particular invokes the fear of being judged a failure and the associated feelings of possible humiliation. In addition to the past experiences of study, the learner's stage of development can also influence how they respond to and interpret the feedback provided. A healthy trainer–learner relationship is of crucial importance if we are to be able to support our students in dealing with any fears they may have in taking the risk of making mistakes. The individuality of learners should also be taken into account. Some learners may perceive trainers as an authoritative figure, and may find that they do not possess the confidence to make contact, whereas other learners may consider it easy and important to maintain regular contact with you.

To finalise this conversation now, lets talk about one last aspect in the roles of trainers: the development of learning motivation.
For many years it was thought that learning motivation was something that students either had or didn't have and that the best thing a trainer could do was to enthuse them with his or her own example. More recent developments in psychology are suggesting that it may be possible to approach the development of learning motivation more systematically.
The basis of this approach is the attempt to influence students' motivation directly, instead of

either expecting it to be already present or attempting to enhance it by example and persuasion. It's not that example and persuasion don't work – it's just that there may be more effective ways of enhancing learning motivation.

The application of 'Positive psychology' to education is showing really promising as a way to develop learning motivation. Generally speaking, 'Positive psychology' focuses on people's strengths and their reasons to be happy. There are quite a few things we trainers could do to use 'Positive psychology' to support students. For example[†]:

- Emphasise the positive during initial contact (especially when providing feedback);
- Try to identify a student's underlying values, goals and motivation;
- Draw out their past successes and high-point moments, especially those that have to do with learning;
- Focus on their existing assets and competencies;
- Identify their resources, and especially their protective factors such as support from family, friends and employers;
- Validate effort rather than achievement;
- ONLY THEN, talk about uncertainties, mistakes, lack of skills.



This will look like a tall order, but in practice these interactions overlap with each other and it is the general approach of emphasising students' strengths and abilities that are important. The essential key is to emphasise that effort is more important than basic intelligence. This is not mere persuasion. It is now widely accepted amongst psychologists that: ***'People often overestimate the importance of intellectual ability. Practice and perseverance contribute more to accomplishment than being smart does'***. (Hoppe and Stojanovic, 2008[‡])

OK, it is clear now that we could be here talking about the roles of trainers for hours! Hopefully you still have some coffee or tea in your cups to keep thinking about what you read in this document and discussing it with your colleagues.

[†] This list was adapted from a talk given by Dr Ilona Boniwell at the Open University (UK) in 2005. More details about her work can be found in a book published in 2011: *Positive Psychology - Theory, Research and Applications,* Open University Press.
[‡] Hoppe, C. and Stojanovic, J. (2008) 'High aptitude minds', *Scientific American Mind*, vol. 19, no. 4, p. 28.