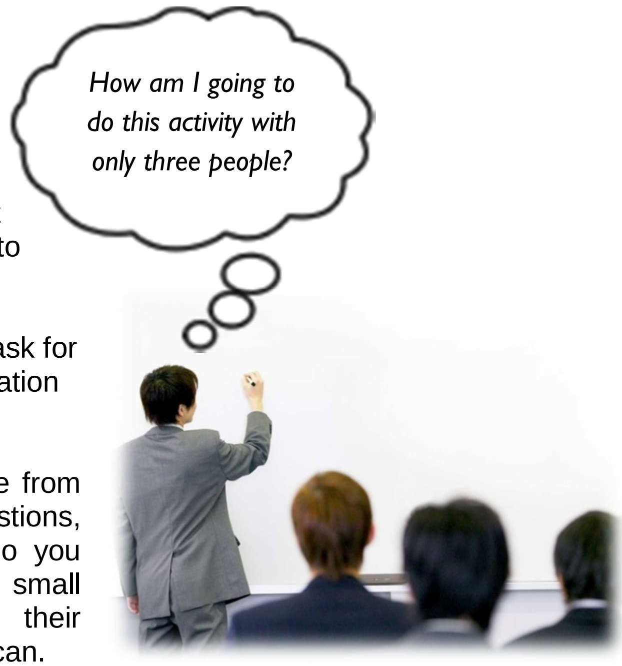
Trainer Tip: Training Small Groups

Have you ever walked into a training room anticipating a large audience to discover only a few participants showed up for the class? Below are some tips and tricks you can use to engage and keep the attention of small training groups:

Strategies for the start of training:



Setting the tone for the day and identifying participants' expectations can be facilitated with more purpose when faced with smaller groups. There is time to not only have each participant state their learning expectations, but to also share expertise and experience related to the topic that he or she brings to the class.

Use the additional time during introductions to ask for more information from participants. The information requested should be purposeful as follows:

> To initiate discussion: "What would you like from your fellow participants?" (such as suggestions, resources, problem-solving, etc.), "What do you see as the advantages, disadvantages of small training groups?" Ask participants for their commitment to participate as much as they can.

> To set the stage for networking: "What area of special knowledge or experience might you bring to this training?"

> To establish valuable expertise in the room: "Have you had a previous job in a helping profession?"

> To engage the participant on a more personal level: "What is something about you that your colleagues probably don't know?" "What are you most passionate about as it relates to your work?"

Strategies during training:

Activities can be adjusted, however, to best meet the needs of a small group (4-6 people). Additionally, trainers can take this opportunity for in depth case discussions, more application exercises, and transfer of learning activities.

Encourage participants to use examples and experiences from their own cases to build case studies, to use in role plays, and to create problem-solving exercises. This is a widely used strategy regardless of class size, but with smaller groups the trainer can guide or use a prepared worksheet to guide participants to develop detailed case studies by asking them to provide more history, identify challenges, outline what strategies have worked, and which ones fell short of the desired goal.

Trainers can take advantage of having more time and facilitate more application exercises. Write additional case studies for group problem-solving or role play activities and keep them on hand for when class size is smaller than anticipated. Or ask the small groups to use research the topic by using the internet to find more current information or data.

When role playing, the process can be redirected numerous times by having participants experiment with re-doing the role play, but this time with a client who is resistant, angry, quiet, or reluctant. For example, a trainer may say "Let's try this section again, but this time the client will be more resistant." Trainers can also create a twist or add complexity to a given case scenario by asking "But what if ..?" For example, "But what if the client arrived to the appointment under the influence of drugs?" or "What if you discovered the client was being battered?"

Trainers can periodically stop the training and ask participants to take a question "from the hat" such as, "What would keep you from implementing this strategy, practice, etc. on the job?"; "What have you been doing already that demonstrates this skill, activity, etc.?"; or "How would your job change if you started this practice?" Discuss the question and encourage trainees to share ideas.

Use a current news story, national event or pending legislation that has some connection to the training content to facilitate further discussion. For example, if the content involves adult financial exploitation, use a recent newspaper or magazine article and ask the group to analyze the story for common myths and misconceptions about exploitation. Or identify parts of a story that reinforce what we currently know to be true about adult financial exploitation.

Trainers can ask participants to join the learning environment by providing participants with written reference information on a specific topic, asking them to study the material and prepare a presentation for the rest of the group. Trainers may find it helpful to give them specific questions to answer regarding the topic.

Strategies for the end of training:

If the training involves content for which there may be different perspectives, create a point/counterpoint discussion that summarizes the concepts. The trainer must make sure the information given is accurate and should summarize the main points of the discussion.

Provide participants with links to online resources and discuss how valuable resources have led to the creation of standards for current evidenced-based practice. If access to the internet is available, there are valuable online resources that participants never have time to access. Spend time surfing the internet and highlight key resources related to your topic.

Conduct a Jeopardy-type wrap-up exercise that covers the content of the workshop. This may be done with cards, the game function on the Classroom Performance System (CPS) or a web based application such as Poll Everywhere.

Allow ample time for participants to complete their action plans. One suggestion is to pair participants to 'critique' action plans before presenting them to the class. Ask each participant to give feedback and suggestions on the implementation of the activities in the plan.