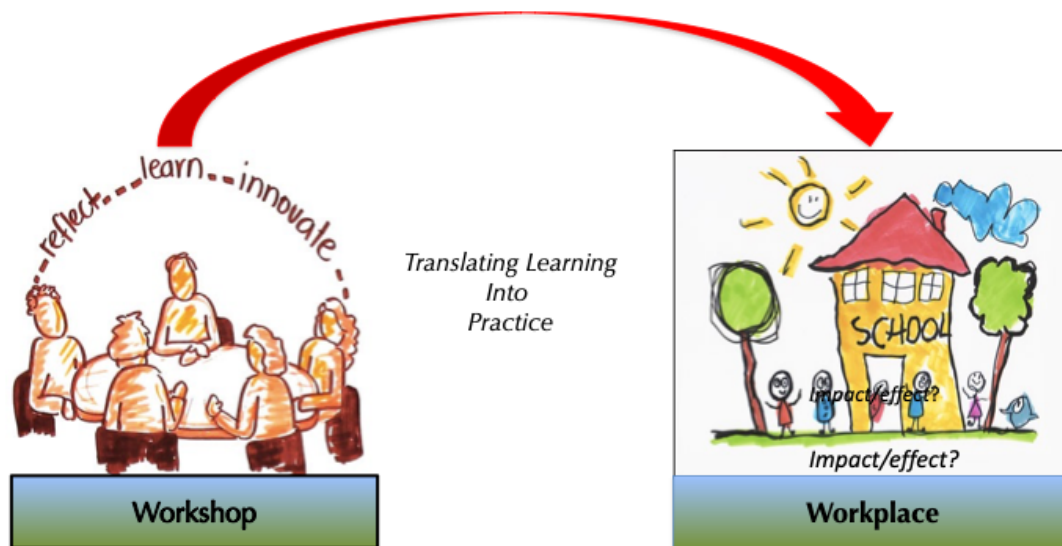


Addressing the “Workshop-to-Workplace Dilemma” in Education Training and Professional Development in South Africa



Allistair Witten
Seed Educational Trust

Introduction

A number of professional development and training initiatives take place in the education sector in South Africa each year. These range from induction programmes to curriculum and leadership and management training for teachers, school principals, SMT members, and district officials. This is a crucial focus of the education system, especially as it seeks to build teacher and leadership capacity to enhance school and district functionality, strengthen teaching practice, and improve learning outcomes. Responsibility for conducting the training sits with the provincial Teacher Development directorates and district teacher development centres, who run hundreds of training workshops for educators across the country every year. A number of external, non-profit organizations that bring expertise related to particular training needs often work alongside provincial and district offices and offer their services to the education department.

However, more attention should be given to *how* the training takes place, especially within the broader context of actively engaging with district officials and school-based educators in learning and professional development. In supporting training efforts for teachers, school and district leaders over the years, we have identified a *deterministic approach* to training in a number of provinces – there is the assumption that

training will inevitably achieve the goals that the programmes set out to achieve. Given the scale at which training takes place in the education system, (as well as the budgets and resources allocated to it), we need to pay more attention to the efficacy and impact of these programmes. This requires us to examine the design, development, and implementation of training programmes in the education sector more carefully.

The Workshop-to-Workplace Dilemma

The importance and impact of professional development programmes for teachers, and, more recently for school leaders, are receiving increasing attention, both in South Africa (DoE, 2005a; 2005b), and internationally (Hoban, 2002; Sachs, 2003). Research by Bush et al. (2006) that explored the quality of these programmes showed that initial efforts to support teacher and leadership development in schools in South Africa have a strong focus on teaching *about* policy rather than its translation into effective practice in schools.

Evidence of the above has been observed in the training work of provincial departments and district offices. District officials involved in training sometimes describe the workshops they conduct as “*sharing information*”; “*lecturing*” on important topics; “*explaining*” policy; and “*telling*” participants what they need to know.¹ These approaches to training form part of what we term ‘*knowledge transmission*’ or ‘*information transfer*’, which often characterize the kind of training that takes place in education sector. The manner in which the training is conducted for adults sometimes mimics the concept of “banking education” (Freire, 1970) – where the learner or student is regarded as an ‘empty’ vessel (a ‘*tabula rasa*’ or blank slate) whose mind must be filled with knowledge and information by the teacher.

When training is conducted in this way (through transfer/transmission) there is the danger that knowledge remains mere information that resides inside someone’s head, but does little to shift thinking and practice. This leads to what we call the “*workshop-to-workplace dilemma*” (Witten, 2021). In education, the dilemma occurs when the training in workshops is not carried over into the workplace and translated into changes in thinking, practices, and behaviours that are required to achieve the goals of the workshop and the strengthening of teacher and leadership practice. This dilemma is not unique to South Africa – it is a challenge experienced by training programmes in many countries (Timperley, 2014).

This approach to training is informed by an underlying trend in the education system (and perhaps in other sectors of South Africa’s public bureaucracy) – while skills development is urgently needed in building the capable state, the *technocratic focus* on how this gets done – where content is delivered by “experts,” and the participants in the training are placed in passive roles as “receivers” of information – often serves to negate the important goals of development and empowerment that are required for workshop participants to become active change agents in the system. Furthermore, in many instances, this kind of training is often disconnected from the contexts of actual practice. In education, this would include the socio-economic and educational contexts of the classroom, the school, and the district – where training as *knowledge*

¹ Quotes from district officials in the Teacher Development Directorate in one of the provinces we have worked in. 17 March 2021.

transmission or information transfer does not adequately take into account and seem far removed from the lived realities of practice.

Understanding the dilemma

A number of professional development and training initiatives that take place in the education sector have logic models or theories of change that clarify goals and assumptions; identify the steps or actions that will be taken to achieve the goals; and allow teams to develop monitoring and evaluation tools to measure progress. However, many programmes overlook the importance of having a *theory of learning* with a clear set of principles that informs its work. While a theory of change has a strong focus on the actions/activities that must be undertaken to achieve a goal, a theory of learning explains *how* people acquire, process and retain knowledge, especially in relation to supporting and improving practice. In the context of professional development, a theory of learning must therefore take into account how adults learn.

In challenging the technocratic approach to training that often prioritizes efficiency and technical expertise to address complex challenges in the education system, one scholar calls for a shift away from an exclusive focus on “skills” training and points out that educators should be given greater “*opportunities to learn... and experiment*” that are built into both professional development training and the daily practices and routines of the school (Little, 1993). Another researcher notes that:

“...A great deal of professional development, whether school-based or external to the school is driven by expectations of compliance and passivity, rather than curiosity and agency...”

(Timperley, 2014, p.6)

While the workshop-to-workplace dilemma is caused by a number of factors (lack of knowledge and capacity, resources, time, organizational culture, adequate planning etc.), too many training programmes overemphasize *what* adults will learn (the content of the programme) and neglect to ask the question relating to *how* they will learn. As noted earlier, professional development and training programmes are essentially about adult learning, and learning comes about when we conduct workshops/work sessions with participants and encourage them to think deeply; to ask questions; to investigate and explore; to connect emotionally; to observe and interrogate; and to share and reflect. By doing this, the concepts of learning and development become inextricably linked – in other words, there can be no development without learning. And, if there is no development, it is unlikely that practice will change.

Put differently, when the approach to learning focuses almost exclusively on the transmission of knowledge (the *what* of learning), it is unlikely to lead to substantive or sustainable change in the education system. In instances where universities or externally accredited training service providers are involved in the training, this can also contribute to what we call *cursory credentialling* – the participation in training programmes for the purpose of obtaining a paper qualification, with very little evidence of how the workshop learning translates into personal and professional growth, and is manifested externally in newly-acquired skills, different behaviours and practices, and changed mindsets and dispositions (Witten & Marishane, 2019). In South Africa, where training can be resource-intensive and time consuming, it is not the amount of programmes that are offered, or even its content that are the only important aspects of the training – what

matters most are the effects of these programmes on practice. This is where the internal processes related to professional learning and development are made “visible.”

Addressing the workshop-to-workplace dilemma

As noted above, capacity building programmes, especially the ones that aim to support policy implementation and the building of skills and capacities related to leadership and teaching practice, need to be clear about the theory of learning that will guide it. Policy implementation should extend beyond teaching policy or programmatic content – it should also involve building the skills and capacities to attain policy goals.

Elmore (2016) further notes that learning should underpin policy and programme implementation. When teachers, school leaders and district officials are asked to do things they don’t yet know *how* to do (like asking them to change and develop new forms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to improve practice), we are actually asking them to learn (and unlearn), to rethink, and to reshape their professional identities.

Professional development and training programmes in South Africa should therefore be more intentional about the adult learning theories that underpin their programmes, and create learning environments that will empower participants to transform their practices. This is not easy nor quick work, and it extends beyond the short term “deliverables” set by the bureaucracy or funders. The transformation of practice always takes time – but it sits at the heart of building the capable state in South Africa.

While there are a number of factors that contribute to the workshop-to-workplace dilemma and need to be addressed if want our training programmes to have greater efficacy, we identify three foundational aspects of professional development that serve as essential starting points for strengthening programmes in the education sector.

1. *Develop an explicit set of principles of adult learning that informs the programme*

Professional development that is based on the principles and practices of adult learning involves real and sustained changes in the way that individuals and groups *think* about and *practice* what they do in their workspaces. These changes encompass a *personal* dimension (in terms of attitudes, mindsets, values, ethics, behaviours, skills, practices and dispositions) as well as an organizational dimension (structures, policies, processes, culture, etc.) These two dimensions interact in a *synergistic* relationship that gives rise to organizational outcomes – in other words, each dimension influences and is shaped by the other, and these interactions determine how the organization functions and what it produces or delivers. While organizations operate within a broader, systemic context that can also influence and affect training outcomes and should be taken into account, many instances of success illustrate that these came about when the people in the organization took responsibility for changing things.

A number of researchers have identified the essential elements that underpin adult learning and should be considered when engaging in professional development activities (Dewey, 1910; Lewin, 1943; Kolb 1984; Knowles 1980; Revans, 2011). These have been grouped together as the following key assumptions of adult learning:

- Adults have a strong sense of the self, and, rather than being treated as passive recipients of knowledge, they want to engage and have a say in their own learning;
- Adults come with a wealth of experiences that have been accumulated over time. These experiences serve as a rich resource for learning that makes professional development activities more meaningful. Their experiences and contexts should be considered and developed into concrete learning experiences that are relevant to practice;
- The learning needs of adults are often located within their social (work) contexts, and adapting to changing contexts requires ongoing learning. In addition, adults do not *automatically* transfer learning from workshops into change behaviours and practices. Sometimes they require follow-up support like coaching or mentoring in which they are given feedback on the effects of their efforts;
- Because learning needs are located in social contexts, much of the adult learning that takes place in the workplace should be problem-centred, in which participants in training seek knowledge that has immediate applicability in the workplace. Adults will commit to learning when they believe that the objectives are realistic and important for their personal and professional needs. In other words, they need to see that *what* they are learning is applicable to their contexts and the daily activities of the workplace; and;
- The motivation of adults to learn is driven by internal (to the individual) rather than external factors. This is why purpose, mental stimulation, affirmation, emotional safety, and an appeal to agency become important when conducting training.

In summary, effective professional development programmes should be underpinned by an approach to adult learning that involves intellectual engagement; makes explicit linkages to practice; builds skills and capacities; nurtures values and dispositions; and draws on existing expertise and insights from participants. An approach like this leads to authentic learning experiences and professional development that will allow programme participants to exercise agency² and become innovative as they fulfil their roles in enabling policy, strengthening school and district functionality, enhancing teacher and leadership practice, and improving learning in schools.

² We define the concept of agency as “... the ability of an individual or group to act on a situation and change it...” This is important, especially in the context of education in South Africa, where much work still needs to be done to create the opportunities to learn for *all* the children and young people in the country.

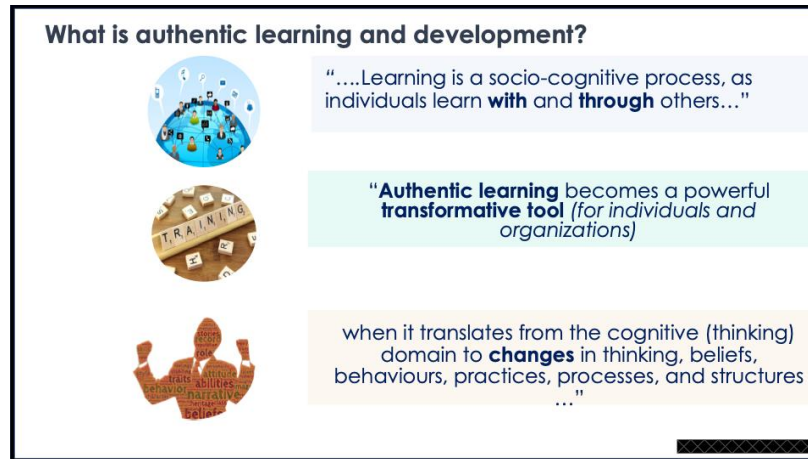


Fig.1 – Connecting adult learning to change

Principles of professional development that should underpin training

Integrating the above assumptions about adult learning and professional development, we propose a key set of principles that can mitigate some of the losses associated with the workshop-to-workplace dilemma. These principles can serve to guide the design, development, and implementation of professional learning programmes. They include the following:

- Professional development should involve meaningful interactions amongst participants and their intellectual, social, and emotional *engagement* with ideas, materials and the experiences of colleagues who are participating in the programme. This principle challenges the concept of training as merely “information transfer,” and has implications for the design of processes and the development of materials of training programmes;
- Professional development should consider the local *contexts* of teaching and learning (and leadership practice), and the broader education system within which these processes take place. This avoids rigidly packaged “one-size-fits-all” approaches that are often adopted when training programmes are implemented at scale;
- Professional development should allow for the *sharing* of ideas and encourage different viewpoints to emerge. The creation of a “safe space” for sharing enriches discussions, challenges thinking, and, by allowing participants to feel “heard,” promotes engagement in the learning process;
- Professional development should promote *reflection* and *inquiry*. School leaders and educators are often pre-occupied with the demands of their work and find very little time for reflecting on teaching and leadership practice. Making time to ask the deeper questions about practice encourages learning and unlocks creativity, innovation and agency amongst teachers and leaders.
- Professional development, especially in the South African context, should explicitly link the strengthening of practice to the core processes of teaching and learning in the school and classroom.

The *instructional core* should be the essential starting point for professional learning and development, and programmes should make explicit connections to it.

In addition to the above principles, Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) further contend that professional standards and teacher evaluation (important aspects of the accountability movement in the U.S. that are often used to measure performance) are not the most effective methods for improving teacher and leadership practice. They note that in countries with high performing education systems (like Finland, Singapore, and Canada), the common feature that distinguishes them from other countries is not their teacher evaluation or professional standards systems, but rather their culture of, “...*collaborative professionalism that permeates the system, serving both individual and collective learning...*” (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016, p. 7).

Developing a collaborative *disposition* or *way of being* is thus an important element in professional development, and training programmes in education should focus on fostering this as a practice among the participants. Furthermore, when adult learning follows a repetitive cycle of action, reflective feedback, and further improvement, it builds “*professional expertise*” (Ericsson & Pool, 2016) that involves the deepening of existing knowledge and skills, and the development of new ones. This forms part of a continuum of professional growth and development that promotes professional autonomy and agency (Kennedy, 2005).

2. Foster reflection as a crucial part of teacher and leadership development

Another important facet of learning that is required to address the workshop-to-workplace dilemma is reflective practice. With training and professional development in the education sector becoming more important in South Africa, the technocratic focus on how training gets done in the country and the professional status of teachers as “technicians” invites further scrutiny. Professional learning (that transforms practice) is not guaranteed by knowledge transmission or information transfer. It requires adaptive practitioners who embrace complexity in the workplace and who engage in ongoing learning and reflection as key recursive professional practices.

Reflective practice is simply defined as the process of stepping back from the actual work and spending time thinking deeply about the work and its effects, e.g. what’s working/not working; identifying one’s own thoughts, feelings, and experiences in doing the work; and formulating ways in which it can improve. In essence, reflective practice is about learning. It broadens our knowledge of the work, provides us with a deeper understanding of an issue or challenge, helps us to acquire new insights about it; and assists us in developing strategies and skills to do things differently. Reflection and inquiry thus becomes an integrated process that focuses on the cognitive, social, emotional and practice-based aspects of the work.

Reflective practice can be both an individual and a group activity. We can reflect on our own and also as part of a bigger group or team – where different perspectives and insights can serve to enrich our thinking and contribute to better decision-making. Reflection should form an intrinsic part of practice, and it is less effective if it becomes an external, “add-on” activity that is imposed on teacher and leadership practice.

Donald Schon (1983, 1990) did some important work on professionals as reflective practitioners. He pointed out that reflection is closely related to actions and personal experiences in doing work, noting that the reflective practitioner engages in “thinking about the effects of actions.”

Schon identifies two types of reflection. Firstly, he refers to the concept of “*reflection-in-action*”, which entails reflecting or consciously thinking about the work while doing it. This involves an in-the-moment awareness of one’s own thoughts and feelings and how others are responding to it. It also allows one to make immediate modifications or changes to the work. Experienced teachers, facilitators and coaches often develop this skill over time – they become adept at “*sensing*” how the lesson, workshop or coaching session is unfolding and are able to make changes along the way.

The second activity Schon identifies is “*reflection-on-action*”, which occurs after completion of the work. This activity is normally built into the evaluation section of the workshop or activity to understand how effective these were. Reflection-on-action is also an essential feature of entities that describe themselves as learning organizations. As mentioned earlier, reflection is in essence about learning, and it is most effective with individuals and teams that value learning in order to improve their practice. Reflection not only enables one to learn about and improve practice, but also to learn about the system, where policies can be evaluated and strategies for systems-wide issues can be developed. In addition to this, reflection becomes important when focusing on the milestones that measure progress towards the goals that have been set.

So why is it so hard to become a reflective practitioner? It can be said that in many organizations, time is often the enemy of reflection. The urgency of our “*busyness*,” often dictated by the responsibilities of our formal roles, has left very little room for this essential practice. One of the ways to get around this challenge is to make reflection a purposeful practice. In other words, we must consciously make time for it. We can also call this “*pushing the pause button*” or taking a “*time-out*” and stepping away from the actual work to reflect on it.

In summary, we have noted the importance of reflection as the conscious and intentional examination of the leader’s or teacher’s behaviour and actions. When conducted in a manner that promotes learning, new understandings and perspectives of the work and our roles in it are likely to emerge. Becoming a reflective practitioner cannot be imposed from the outside – it has to be developed from the inside the school or district office and become part of its organizational culture. Reflective practice enables the leader to be more present in the moment of every task and activity in the daily work schedule, and to become more attentive to the processes as well as the people involved in the work.

Finally, reflective practice forms the bedrock of transformation – it engenders individual (internal) and collective transformation. When this occurs in an organizational setting, it will in turn lead to the transformation of its structures, processes, and culture. We know this is not easy and will take time. We also know that organizations per se do not change – people do.

3. *Changing the way we train – from presenting to facilitating*

In order to promote a culture of adult learning, we also need to pay more attention to *how* training takes place in South Africa. This will involve adopting a different approach to “telling” or “presenting” (information/knowledge transfer) in training sessions, one that pays more attention to how learning and development can take place in workshop/training sessions and the workshop goals or objectives will be achieved. We refer to this as workshop “facilitation,” which involves careful planning and preparation, setting goals for what needs to be achieved, designing interactive exercises and activities, and developing ways to guide the learning conversations during the workshop.

What is facilitation?

The word “facilitate” comes from the French word “facile”, which means, “to make easy” or “to enable.” In a professional development context, we define it as the process of *enabling and guiding learning* amongst individuals or within a group. The role of the facilitator is to help a group to discuss an issue, share insights and ideas about it, make a decision, or solve a problem.

Facilitation is different from presenting or teaching content on a topic or an organizational issue, where the presenter transfers the information as facts, is the authority on the topic, and is considered the “expert.” A facilitator’s job is *not* to provide *all* the answers, but rather to get others in the group to assume responsibility for learning and take the lead in seeking answers to questions. The facilitator thus serves to guide the discussion in a way that fosters deeper understanding and allows new forms of knowledge to emerge.

Key aspects of facilitation

The facilitator has an important responsibility to foster ongoing learning in the group. Besides guiding the discussion, s/he has to create an environment that is conducive to learning. This not only takes into account the “ground rules for learning,” but also the physical layout of the training venue; timely breaks; and the creation of a safe “space” that allows the participants to share with and learn from each other.

The facilitator focuses on both the *content* and *process* of facilitation and is the content and process leader. Content refers to the theories, tasks, subjects, and problems being addressed in the discussion. Process refers to *how* things are discussed and the methodologies that are used for engaging the group. The content of the discussion emerges out of the processes employed by the facilitator. This means that the facilitator has to pay careful attention to the processes employed in a discussion.

Facilitation is also about “... *promoting participation, ensuring equity, and building trust...*” (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter & McDonald, 2003). When a facilitator encourages participation, this fosters openness to the perspectives of others and allows a broader base of knowledge to develop. The facilitator promotes equity by allowing all voices to be heard; acknowledging the value of each contribution; and recognizing the differences in perspectives. By engaging the group to develop shared norms that will guide their interactions, the facilitator builds trust in the group process that creates a safe space in which the participants can learn from each other.

Principles of effective facilitation

Besides being a self-reflective practitioner, the facilitator's work is underpinned by a set of beliefs or a philosophy about the purposes of education, adult learning and development, and school improvement in South Africa. These beliefs influence both the content and processes of facilitation, especially in the manner in which the facilitator engages and interacts with the participants. An effective facilitator should take time to identify and reflect on her/his personal beliefs and philosophies about education, and the assumptions of how people learn. Here are some important principles to keep in mind when facilitating:

- *Adopt a "strengths" approach to professional development*

Given the tremendous challenges we face in education, it is easy to hold a "deficit-based" perspective of training in South Africa. In this view, engagement with workshop participants are based on what they are lacking (in terms of knowledge or skills), without acknowledging their strengths and the existing "knowledges" and experiences they bring into the room with them. In this paradigm of training, educators are regarded as "technicians"³ who bring "problems of practice" into the workshop that have to be "fixed," often by an "expert" who comes in from the outside. This approach tends to place responsibility for problems solely on individuals, without taking into account the broader organizational, contextual or systemic influences that may have contributed to the problems. This can lead to defensiveness, demotivation, frustration, and a closing off to learning among the participants in the workshop.

Instead, it is important to adopt a strengths-based approach to professional development. This approach focuses on addressing challenges by recognizing existing knowledge, experiences, and strengths that people have and can bring to the work of school and district improvement. This allows *agency* to emerge, and people who exercise agency are able to visualize a different future, develop a course of action, and work interdependently to realize their future goals. In this approach, people are involved in identifying the problems and are encouraged to take ownership in addressing it. As noted earlier, while much of the current learning approaches are based on the assumption that adult learners are 'vessels' to be filled, it is important to remember that effective facilitation has a catalytic effect – it is like setting a spark to light a fire, where people become active participants in their own learning and development.

- *Acknowledge complexity and be open-minded and inclusive*

Leading and managing a school in the South African context is an inherently complex task. There are often no easy, quick, one-size-fits-all solutions to many of the challenges encountered by schools. While there are many technical issues that need to be confronted in strengthening school functionality, such as maintaining the property and compiling the annual school calendar, these do not occur in isolation from other important schooling components. Addressing these issues as individual and disparate tasks may not lead to the achievement of a school's long-term improvement goals.

³ The concept of "teachers as technicians" suggests a view of teachers as primarily implementing pre-defined methods and techniques of teaching where tools with formulaic prescriptions are used to achieve objectives, rather than as autonomous professionals who are critical thinkers with their own professional judgement and pedagogical approaches, and who use these to address challenges of practice (Giroux, 1988).

We believe that adopting a complexity-based view of the world is an essential mindset shift that we all need to make when trying to strengthen educational processes and improve schooling outcomes. Ultimately, taking a complexity stance means that we give up the notion of a single, best course of action for school effectiveness in which there is just one right approach. Rather, the role of the facilitator in grappling with the complex challenges of schooling is essential in developing new insights and different courses of action to deal with it.

- *Connect to the instructional core*

While the focus of facilitation is often on building teacher and leadership capacity, all of this is actually about the learners and improving learning outcomes. Keeping the learner in mind is central to this work. We have defined learner outcomes as a combination of:

- Learner persistence and progression rates;
- The learner's academic performance and psycho-social development (a focus on the whole child);
- The learner's readiness for their next level of education (from grade to grade; phase to phase; primary to secondary; and tertiary to the workplace); and;
- The extent to which the learner is prepared for life, society and active citizenship.

- *Engage thinking and feelings*

Finally, people are the essential role players in the school system. We cannot work *on* the system (to change and strengthen it) without working *with* the people inside of it at the same time. People are key, and relationships are important. While there is evidence to suggest that effective facilitators work at developing expertise in different areas like content, process, or evaluation and monitoring, the biggest impact depends on how participants respond to four basic needs for human engagement (Conley, 2015). This comes in the form of four simple questions that can be asked before and after the workshop has been conducted:

- How do I build trust in the group?
- How do I recognize their contributions (affirm them) and give them a sense of worth?
- How do I challenge their thinking, engage them in learning, and build their skills and competence?
- How do I encourage/motivate/give them hope (so that they can do something, no matter how small, to bring about change and improvement)?

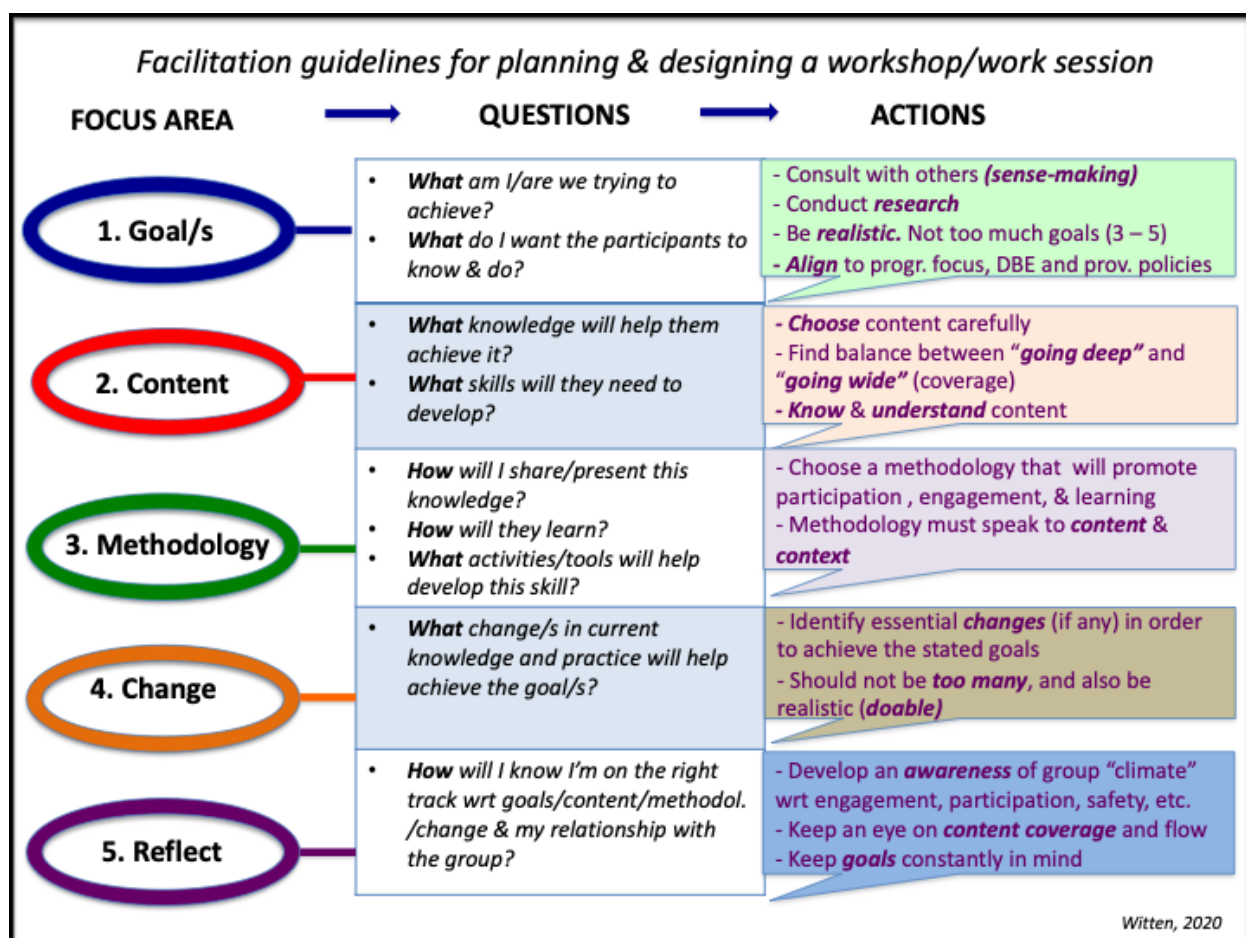


Fig. 2 Guidelines for facilitation

Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed the importance of training and professional development in strengthening school and district functionality, and enhancing teaching and learning in schools. It provides educators with opportunities for continuous learning to update their knowledge, refine their skills, and improve their practice.

Effective forms of professional development are also essential in achieving policy objectives, which requires building the capacity of people across the system who are responsible for implementing policy. We refer to this as “policy enabling”. We have identified the “workshop-to-workplace dilemma” – where too little of the workshop learning translates into changing practice – as one of the challenges to improving performance across all levels of the education system in South Africa, and have identified three essential starting points to addressing it. Lastly, we have shared an unwavering belief that all human beings (including teachers, school and district leaders) can learn, change, and exercise agency – all in the service of improving learning outcomes for the children and young people in our country.

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