

Book Review

Facilitating Group Learning: Strategies for Success with Diverse Adult Learners

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Citation: Lakey, G. (2010). *Facilitating Group learning: Strategies for Success with Diverse Adult Learners*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. ISBN: 978-0-470-76863-1

Publisher Description: This book defines principles and techniques for teaching adults in groups and includes illustrative stories from the experiences of the author. It deals with issues of diversity, as well as authenticity and emotions in group learning. This book describes how to design effective learning experiences, and how to facilitate these learning experiences, and brings all the elements of the author's approach together. It also includes material on sustaining the educator, working with social movements, and an effective toolkit. This book is resource for facilitators of adults in group learning situations. Jossey – Bass <http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0470768630.html>

An adult educator who has consulted with labor unions and adult education programs to develop gender sensitive leadership training and other anti-oppression work, Lakey quickly engages the reader with tales of his teaching/learning/facilitating experiences with adult learners. His accounts stress the need for authenticity and emotion in the learning process if the learner is to come away from the experience with anything meaningful. The narrative stories accompanying the chapters allow the reader to explore the complexity of teaching and how that complexity can develop into discovery. Loosely framed around Tuckman's stages of group development with a nod to Mezirow's transformational leadership, the text begins by explaining the motivation of groups and individuals followed by highlighting internal group differences, after which the author explores the design and facilitation of group learning.

Chapter 1 begins with Lakey introducing the concept of direct education and explaining how it can be used to focus the encounter of teacher and group. An experiential approach, direct education methods stimulate learners into spontaneous responses focused on kinesthetic and emotional learning channels. In *Part I: The Learning Group and the Individual*, Lakey offers the reader a useful way to understand the relationship between the learning group and the individual while generating synergy. Chapter 2 begins by advising facilitators to consider the group environment as a container and to build it strong enough to hold conflicts without suppressing participants with ground rules. Stressing that a "safe container" is necessary if participants are to explore their power and do their best work, the author advises that positive reinforcement is a necessary approach to the successful implementation of direct education. He also reveals that teachers have a mandate to be proactive during the container building process.

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Chapter 3 stresses that facilitator expectations influence the learner's attitudes toward themselves and goes on to point out that participants should be deeply challenged to take responsibility for their learning because they cannot become powerful learners while coasting on objectives set out in the curriculum. In Chapter 4 the reader begins to understand that even though much of the learning work is done with the mainstream, the facilitator/teacher needs to be an ally to margins to help them find their voice and state their demands. Assisting the mainstream to renegotiate its relationship with the margins results in an overall group movement toward equality and mutual respect. It becomes apparent that direct education's approach is to support conflict between mainstream and margins while going outside the comfort zone of participants.

In *Part II: Diversity, Difference, and Emotions in Group Learning* Lakey shows that participants in a learning group are amazingly different from each other, even if they believe they are homogeneous. Lakey begins Chapter 5 by advising facilitators to trust in the secret life of the group and build bridges to it with activities designed to support mutual self-disclosure. He points out the need for teachers to be aware that high performance may follow periods of storming. Chapter 6 prompts facilitators to be prepared to assist participants in the identification of their mainstream and marginal identities as they introduce them to the complexities of the real world. The chapter admonishes facilitators to acknowledge group differences in order to accelerate learning and suggests that a learning community has a steep learning curve. The author points out characteristics of the group's margin are often in contrast with the mainstream of the group and facilitators must learn to confront and deal with oppressive behaviors in the group setting.

Chapter 7 suggests that facilitators model a pro-diversity, pro-conflict, and pro-discomfort attitude while remaining aware they are unconsciously privileging mainstream communication styles and customs. Lakey points out that diversity issues and conflict styles must be addressed and he uses his personal experience as a European American living in a biracial family with African Americans as an example. He suggests employing a discussion of cultural assumptions about communication and conflict in the black/white culture and using meta-communication as an intervention to assist emergence of authentic reactions. In Chapter 8 Lakey reminds the readers that as facilitator you must let go of the management job assigned by class society, mobilize your curiosity, and be aware that social class and diversity often combine to squelch natural curiosity. He also explores how to challenge the cultural practice of "calling out" an individual engaged in oppressive behavior.

Chapter 9 offers advice to be on guard for authentic expression because a relevant learning curriculum will often result in an emotional learning experience for the group, but many individuals have learned to control their emotions while others expose their emotions by acting as caretakers for the emotional needs of the participants.

Part III: Designing Learning Experiences explores principles of workshop and curriculum design that actually work. Chapter 10 discusses the classical four-step model of experiential education developed by Kolb (experience, reflect, generalize, and apply), stressing that it is essential for multicultural learning groups. Chapter 11 advises that participants in the learning group already know much of what they need to know in order to move ahead and that rather than residing in each participant the knowledge is within the group. The challenge is to get the group to tell their story. Lakey uses Chapter 12 to discuss the phenomena that learning difficult material depends on how well the thing to be learned fits the belief system of the participants.

In Chapter 13 Lakey reveals that learning groups need times of integration, working as a group, and differentiation, working as subgroups, and will create this rhythm if it is not provided by the facilitator. He goes on to tell us in Chapter 14 that direct education should maintain accountability to the stated workshop goals along with a commitment to assist participants in reaching their own learning goals wherever possible. Then in Chapter 15 we understand that emergent design requires good facilitator preparation in order to deal with the dynamic goals of the participants within the confines of the workshop goals.

Part IV: Facilitation takes us through the final portion of the process by discussing instructional design and intervention along with the need for framing and cultural sensitivity in our group setting. In Chapter 16 Lakey gently reminds the reader that the major aspects of setting the tone are signaling the relationship you want to have with the group and explaining the parameters of the situation while remaining aware that most participants want to fit in. He tells us it is imperative facilitators assure the group is a safe place for learning, and working with the group. Chapter 17 builds on the premise by making us aware that sources of edgy facilitator interventions often come from awareness of timing and awareness of the main projections placed on the facilitator. The astute reader realizes that both of these often function to invite participants out of their comfort zone so they can learn.

Once again working the topic of the mainstream and the margin, Chapter 18 tells us the primary thing facilitators can do is help participants learn to frame and reframe while simultaneously exploring the margins and the mainstream for intervention opportunities. We understand from this chapter that the author's use of storytelling presents an opportunity to elicit participant responses that may lead to a reframe for the group. In Chapter 19 Lakey openly tells us facilitation is hard to accomplish in the best situations. He lets us know that working with new or unfamiliar cultures makes group diagnoses more difficult and should only be attempted after setting aside assumptions and replacing them with curiosity and honor. He also points out that an awareness of the cultural situation and the value of presenting an appreciative presence are necessary when crossing cultural lines.

In a final call to action, Chapter 20 asks the facilitator to watch for transformational moments that signal when the group is open to letting go of a block to learning as well as teachable moments when the group is open to new learning. The realization here is that encouraging participants to confront their limiting beliefs opens the door to transformational possibility. Finally, Chapter 21 sums up by pointing out that direct education harnesses the unique motivation of the learner and the safety of the group container while helping participants maintain an awareness of their personal responsibility as they form an interdependent relationship with their leader, one that enables a group to complete the training. The Appendices contain additional cases and resources for supplemental reading on the topic of direct education.