

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE:

Encouraging Learning through Participant Engagement

Adapted from USAID's "Permagarden Adult Learning Training Resources"

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Photo by Elin DUBY



Key aspects of a participatory training

What is a participatory training?

A participatory training requires gardeners to work together with a facilitator towards a learning goal. Rather than a traditional lecture, where a teacher stands in front and presents new information, a participatory training constantly requires input from the participants themselves. As such, gardeners are asked to share their own knowledge, ask questions, and have frequent discussions about why certain things happen and what can be done about it.

Creating a “safe” and respectful learning environment

In order for participants to feel safe, it is important to establish a good learning environment from the very beginning. All participants need to feel safe and respected during the training to encourage their learning. Respectful dialogue is the most effective way to encourage learning. Dialogue helps participants make sense of new information by allowing them to weave it together with their previous experiences, information they have heard from others, and open questions they have. Taking time at the beginning of the training to establish a safe, trusted environment can make a huge difference in participants’ ability to learn.



SUGGESTIONS:

- Start a training with introductions and allow participants to share something about themselves and why they have come to the training so that participants get to know each other.
- Allow participants to share expectations and fears about the training.
- Create a group agreement for the training (“we listen when others speak” as an example).
- Conduct an “ice breaker” at the beginning of the training and at the start of each new session. Some examples of ice breakers are provided in the appendix.
- Be aware of power dynamics in the group. Allow quiet participants to also be heard.
- Make it clear at the beginning of the training that dialogue is expected and welcomed.

Considering gender dynamics during a participatory training

- Women may be less inclined to speak up in the presence of men. If this is the case, then it may be necessary to organize separate sessions for men and women.
- Women may feel more at ease if the facilitator is also a woman. Since home garden programs usually target women, consider using mostly women facilitators.
- Women and men may have different literacy levels, so women may not be able to fully participate when the facilitator uses flipcharts or other tools with written text. Design your trainings so that it is appropriate for the lowest—not the average—level of literacy that you expect within the group.
- Women’s time is often less flexible than men’s time as many women have responsibilities within their households, such as meal preparation, cleaning, and childcare, in addition to paid work and community responsibilities. Carefully consider this when deciding on the time and length of the training session as lengthy training sessions may preclude women from participating or place undue stress on them. Short but frequent sessions are usually easier for busy participants than training events that occupy the whole day.
- Women may have less access to means of transportation than men and may need to walk to the training location. This is important to consider when choosing the training location as inconvenient or far locations may prevent women from attending.
- In some places, women may need the consent of their husband or another family member to attend the training and to set up or expand the home garden. It can be important to inform and sensitize the community to the project before the start of the training so that women participants feel supported and are encouraged to attend.
- In many societies, women have a limited voice in decision-making within their household or community and are not often asked to share their opinions. Participatory learning methods can initially be confusing, and potentially scary, if they are dramatically different than what women are used to. This requires the facilitator to be extra patient and understanding as women learn new methods of behaving.

How adults learn

In order to become a good facilitator, it is important to understand how adults learn. Unlike children, adults will arrive at a training with their own thoughts, opinions, previous experiences, and biases. It can work against a facilitator if you ignore these.

Adults learn best when the content of the training is relevant to their own lives.

Adults must see how the content of the training is relevant to their own lives or they will easily disengage from the learning process. If the content is relevant and useful to their lives, adults tend to learn very quickly.

SUGGESTIONS:

- Take time to understand what is important to participants. Make time during the first training for participants to share what they hope to learn and continuously check in with participants.
- Connect content with participants' daily lives and real needs by using stories and examples that apply to that context.
- Ask participants to relate content to their own lives when asking questions. For example, ask participants to share their experiences of composting or crop rotation and then discuss these as a group.
- Use local examples in your discussions. For instance, ask participants to name locally available materials and plants whenever possible.

Adults learn best when they can see an immediate value of the training to their own lives.

If participants can see an immediate application of what they are learning, they will be more eager to try and implement it on their own.

SUGGESTIONS:

- Start your trainings by asking participants to list clear and concrete benefits they will receive from the training in order to peak their interest early.
- Help participants find opportunities to immediately apply what they are learning.
- Ask them directly to describe when and where they will apply what they have learned.
- Break big changes down into smaller steps so participants do not feel overwhelmed.
- Discuss the challenges participants are facing and ask if any of the content in the course can be used to solve these problems.

Adults learn best when they feel safe and respected.

Adults feel respected when they can safely voice their opinions without judgment and when their knowledge and experience are acknowledged as important.

SUGGESTIONS:

- Provide a safe learning environment (see previous section).
- Consider gender dynamics within the group and how they might affect a participant's ability to feel safe and respected (see previous section).
- Encourage participants to share their own experience and knowledge, ask questions, and voice their concerns.
- Avoid activities and games that can be embarrassing for people.
- Use constructive and supportive feedback. Always show appreciation for participants' contributions and acknowledge them as important. NEVER respond to a participant's contribution by laughing at them or saying it is wrong.

Adults learn best when they are fully engaged and included in the learning process.

Adults enjoy being engaged in the learning process rather than being treated as passive recipients of information. Adults highly value contributing to a problem-solving process, therefore trainings are much more effective if everyone is working together to solve a problem. It is important to recognize that adults come to trainings with existing knowledge and rich life experience that can be beneficial to everyone, including the facilitator.

SUGGESTIONS:

- When introducing a new subject, start with asking participants what they know about the subject before explaining it. Consider how the training material may reinforce or disprove something participants already think so that you can better help participants reflect on the new material.
- Spend less time presenting information and more time engaging participants through discussions or practical, hands-on activities.
- Ask participants to relate what they are learning to their previous experiences.
- Guide conversations to ensure that louder voices are not dominating the training and quieter voices can be heard.
- Use work in pairs and small groups so that everyone is engaged, even quieter voices.

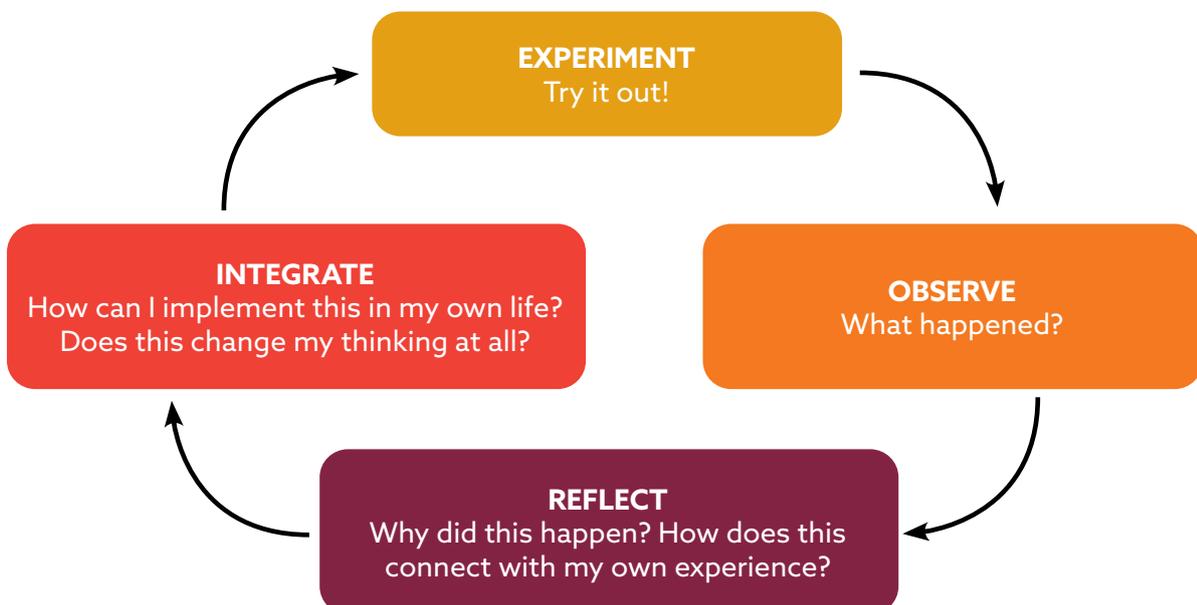
Adults learn best when they can use experimentation to solve problems.

Adults learn best when they are encouraged to experiment in a safe setting and then reflect on the outcomes. This promotes an attitude of curiosity and desire to problem solve rather continuing to view problems as insurmountable or failure as inevitable. While experimenting, participants are also building their confidence to try new things. If adults do not think they will succeed when they try something new, they are much less likely to even try. Experimenting and problem-solving in a safe space can build this initial confidence.

SUGGESTIONS:

- Incorporate experiments and hands-on activities into the training sessions and work out solutions as a group.
- Encourage creativity and debate when problem-solving.
- Create an environment where it is safe to 'fail' because 'failure' is an opportunity to learn.
- Have participants offer ideas and strategies for how to improve the techniques they are learning. Encourage participants to try their ideas at home and report back to the group.

Experiential Learning Diagram



Learning styles

Just like there will be a diversity of personalities in any group, there will also be a diversity of 'learning styles' in any group. A learning style refers to the way a person prefers to learn. Some people are practical and learn best by doing. Some are visual learners who learn through observing facilitator presentations or seeing others learn. Some are auditory learners who learn through discussion. Many will prefer a combination of learning styles. Each training should incorporate a diversity of ways to learn so that all learning styles are included. Learning styles are also influenced by age and literacy for example.

Different learning styles can be summarized as:

Learning by seeing: Seeing pictures, diagrams, and illustrations.

Learning by hearing: Listening to presentations, lectures, other people discussing around them, and recordings.

Learning by reading and writing: Reading materials and writing notes.

Learning by doing: Being engaged in practical activities, observing activities taking place, and experimenting.

Becoming a facilitator

When talking about participatory trainings, the word 'facilitator' is used rather than 'trainer' or 'teacher.' This is because a participatory process requires someone to **facilitate the learning process**. A 'trainer' is someone who trains others in a new task or idea, but does not incorporate the perspectives of the trainees into the material. Even a 'teacher' is supposed to teach – but we have already seen that adults learn best if they feel that they are in charge! On the other hand, a facilitator models to participants **how to learn** through respectful dialogue, critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration toward a common goal.

Becoming a good facilitator requires us to nurture the following skills and attitudes in ourselves:

Be an active listener

- A good facilitator is a good listener. This means listening with curiosity and not judgement. By listening attentively, a facilitator can confirm that the training material is relevant and of immediate value to the participants (see adult education principles above). If facilitators are listening, they will also know if participants are confused, unconvinced, unmotivated, not confident, or overwhelmed by the information shared.
- One way of showing that a facilitator is actively listening is to repeat back to the participant what they asked, for example by stating, **"So what John here is saying is that his basil grows very well together with his tomatoes – am I right John?"** One way of making sure the whole group is actively listening is to ask another participant to state what they have heard another participant say but in their own words.

Be comfortable with silence

- Questions are often met with silence while participants think. However, silence can also mean that something is not clear to participants. As a facilitator, it is important to allow time for participants to process questions, but it is also important for the facilitator to provide clarification when needed.

Stay focused on objectives while being flexible

- It can be easy for discussions to go off topic in a participatory training that encourages discussion. As a facilitator, it is important to stay focused on the objectives of the session. Bring the conversation back to the topic of the session while encouraging participants' ideas by saying, *"This is really interesting to explore further another time but let's return to the topic of this session."*
- While it is important to stay focused on objectives, it is also important to be flexible. A facilitator can never know exactly how a training will go and may have to deal with unexpected situations. Sometimes a facilitator will need to shorten an activity or adapt a session so it is more appropriate for the participants and the context.
- It takes time for a facilitator to develop the skills needed to meet the training objectives while allowing for flexibility. It is helpful for a facilitator to recognize that they too will grow through this process.

Foster mutual respect among the participants and the facilitator

- It is very difficult to learn in an environment where one does not feel safe and respected. It is important to give encouragement to participants either through verbal or non-verbal actions; even the facilitator nodding their head as a participant speaks can make a participant feel more comfortable. If a participant says something a facilitator disagrees with, a facilitator should consider why the participant might have this perspective before responding. A facilitator can either probe deeper to get more explanation or acknowledge that it is ok for people to have different opinions or ways of doing things.

Allow time for reflection

- Providing time for reflection is a crucial part of learning (see experiential learning diagram). Create time for participants to reflect on what they have learned, how it reinforces or challenges what they thought before, and how they will apply this new thinking in their daily lives.

Use questions

- Ask questions that encourage participants to share more than just 'yes' or 'no' and connect what they are learning with their own lives or with previous sessions to help participants "layer" new information onto existing information. It is helpful to ask questions in a variety of different ways. (See Tips on How to Use Questioning)

Use a flipchart or board to reinforce concepts

- Visuals or illustrations can reinforce concepts for participants and helps summarize complex discussions. (See Tips on How to Visually Present Information)

Incorporate practical activities that allow participants to build confidence

- Practical activities allow participants to learn by doing and build confidence as they go.
- Start by demonstrating a task yourself, explaining what you are doing as you do it, before engaging participants.
- Small scale modelling of techniques is a useful tool to demonstrate practical activities before starting the work. It can help participants understand what the finished product will look like and therefore better understand what they are doing.
- Split participants up into smaller groups to work on different tasks so everyone is engaged.

Tips on How to Use Questioning

OPEN QUESTIONS: These questions often start with 'who' 'what' 'why' or 'when.' These questions allow participants to think and share their thoughts around a specific topic. Open questions are useful to check if participants have understood because you hear a participant explain something in their own words.

FOR EXAMPLE: *"Why is mulching important for soil health?"*

CLOSED QUESTIONS: These questions are answered with either a 'yes' or 'no.' Closed questions are useful only if you want to check a fact or get a short answer, but they are not useful for learning or checking if participants have understood content. A closed question can be useful as a way to get participants on the same page.

FOR EXAMPLE: *"Does anyone know of the plant Tithonia?"* If someone then says yes, then this can be followed by the open question, *"Can you explain how this plant can be useful for our gardens?"*

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS: These questions help people reflect on what was just discussed by allowing them to recap material. This gives participants a chance to learn from each other and solidify new concepts.

FOR EXAMPLE: *"How could you apply this technique in your own garden?"*

PICK-UP QUESTIONS: These questions help you return to a previous point or session. These can help participants make linkages between the different modules.

FOR EXAMPLE: *"Recall how in our Garden Establishment session we looked at the benefits of taking time to plan what we plant and where. What do you think are the benefits of this planning now that we are learning about Crop Rotation?"*

DIRECT QUESTIONS: These questions are directed to a specific participant who has knowledge in a certain subject. It can also be a way to get a participant's attention.

FOR EXAMPLE: *"Janet, you have a compost pit in your garden, can you explain why we start with putting these sticks at the bottom?"*

Tips on How to Visually Present Information

Some tips on how to write on a flipchart or board most effectively:

- Prepare what you will write in advance. If using a flipchart, you can write out the training agenda or the title of the different sessions at the top of the page in advance.
- Write in big, print letters (not cursive) and use different colors (darker colors are easier to see on a flipchart).
- Stand by the side of the flipchart and look directly at participants when discussing. Only turn towards the flipchart when writing. In order to reinforce what has been written, read it out loud once you have turned to face the participants.
- Use illustrations, drawings, tables, and graphs to illustrate concepts.
- In some cases there may not be funding for flipcharts or no flipcharts available – this is OK! A training can also be done easily with dialogue and demonstrations modelled or written on the ground using sticks and stones.

Working with groups

Working with smaller groups

Working in smaller groups helps increase engagement in the training, builds relationships among the participants, and helps prevent trainings from becoming too top-down. Use a variety of group break-out methods to make the training more interesting and keep participants engaged.

PAIR WORK: Participants have discussions in groups of two or three. Pair work allows quieter voices to be heard and is a great way to build relationships within the group.

BUZZ GROUPS: Buzz groups are a great way to get everyone engaged quickly and can act as an energizer for the group. Buzz groups are small groups discussing a specific question for a short amount of time only (approximately five minutes). If a facilitator intends to use buzz groups frequently, they should consider how the seating should be set up to facilitate this.

SMALL GROUPS: Breaking participants up into small discussion groups of four to six participants is a great way to ensure that everyone is engaged. Try to make groups diverse and rotate participants between groups every once in a while. A simple way to split participants up into small groups is to conduct a count. For example, if you want to split the participants up into four groups, have participants count "one, two, three, four," assigning a number to each participant as you move around the group. Repeat the count until all participants are assigned a "one," "two," "three," or "four." Make sure to give clear instructions for the group work before the groups form.

Dealing with difficult group dynamics

Many groups work well together for the duration of the training. However, sometimes facilitators are confronted with participants with challenging behavior that can disrupt the group. Here are some suggestions to deal with this:

Read the group. Often the facilitator can tell early on if someone might become disruptive. Be aware of group dynamics early so you can mitigate conflicts using some of the strategies below.

Let the group work it out. Participants are often able to work out disagreements among themselves and there is no need for you to get involved. Avoid getting yourself caught in a tricky situation where you may be forced to choose sides for or against any participant or group of participants.

Introduce group agreements. Have a discussion on what makes a safe learning environment for all participants and revisit it if necessary. This allows all participants to voice their needs and concerns and can diffuse the situation.

Do not take it personally. If a participant is being negative about the training, it is important as a facilitator to listen but not take it personally. The issue is often not about the facilitator but about something else.

Use the break to discuss issues. If a participant is challenging during the training, offer to have a private discussion in the break time to understand what is going on. Remember not to take it personally!

Use energizers and ice-breakers. Games help build trust and can sometimes also help change the group's energy.

Allow complaining. It is important for participants to be able to raise concerns but do not let it drag on. Facilitators can allow individuals to voice a concern and then move on to looking for positive solutions.

Be flexible. Be prepared to change the plan if it seems obvious that your plan is not working.

Introduce a tool to deal with issues. For example, place a flipchart on the wall where participants can write down their concerns and then dedicate some time during the session to work through those concerns as a group.

APPENDIX

Ideas for ice breakers, group formation, energizers, and recap/review sessions

Getting to know each other:

Circle introduction. Participants stand in a circle. Each participant says their name and the name of the participant before them. The last person has to say all the names. This exercise is also fun to do with a simple clapping rhythm at the same time.

Anna the Ape. Participants stand in a circle. Each participant introduces themselves, saying their name plus the name of an animal starting with the same letter. For example, "Anna the Ape, Eric the Elephant, Fernanda the Frog."

Who are you? Like the Anna the Ape game above but instead of an animal name, participants add an adjective to describe themselves. The adjective does not have to describe them correctly and creativity is encouraged! For example, "Affable Anna, Excited Eric, Fabulous Fernanda."

Ball game. Participants stand in a circle and the facilitator introduces a ball. The person holding the ball must say the name of the person they are throwing it to. Allow the ball to be thrown around at random but make sure that it has been passed to everyone at least once. If you want to make it more fun, you can introduce more balls but only once there has been a round where everyone has said their name.

Rank in line. Ask participants to line up according to a ranking criterion, for example, height. If you want to make it more involved, use a ranking criterion that will make sure participants engage in more of a discussion such as 'years having been a gardener.'

Stand up if you... The facilitator prepares a set of statements and asks participants to stand up quickly if the statement applies to them. For example "Stand up if you have children. Stand up if you like sweets. Stand up if you like to grow chili peppers."

Sharing songs. A nice way to start the day is for the facilitators to ask if a participant has a song to share. Often, they will sing a song that everyone knows and can sing along.

Methods for splitting into groups:

Random formation. Ask participants to form groups of four as quickly as possible.

Fruit teams. Count participants into teams using fruits instead of numbers.

Pick an item. During break time, facilitator picks a different mix of leaves, sticks, stones, or other commonly available items and puts them in a pile. Make sure to have enough for each participant and the quantity of each type of item to match the size of the preferred group. For example, if the facilitator is splitting participants into groups of four, then the facilitator will want four leaves, four stones, four sticks. Tell participants to grab an item from the pile and then find other participants with the same type of item.

Wake up and energize:

Are we together? This is a quick exercise that can be used whenever the facilitator senses that participants may be drifting off. The facilitator instructs participants in the beginning of the training to respond to the call 'Are we together' with 'Yes, we are together' and to throw their hands up in the air while doing so.

Spell words with your body. Stand in a circle and ask participants to spell a word like 'coconut' with their bodies by first forming a 'C' with their body, then an 'O,' and so on.

Follow the leader. Participants stand in a circle. Facilitator steps into the middle of the circle and makes a movement and then asks participants to copy. Facilitator then steps out and asks another participant to offer another movement.

Spot the leader. One person leaves the room or goes somewhere where they cannot see or hear the group. The group assigns someone to be the 'leader' and then the person outside is called back. The leader then makes different movements and the group copies and the person coming in must guess who the leader is.

Thunderstorm. Stand in a circle. The facilitator guides participants to start rubbing their hands together vigorously. Walk around the inside of the circle and indicate that, as you pass, participants should change what they are doing to what you are doing. Complete one round within the circle rubbing your hands together, then change to snapping your fingers. Participants will also start to snap their fingers as you pass them. Complete one or two circles, then start slowly clapping. Complete another round or two within the circle and then increase the speed of your clapping. Eventually start clapping and stamping your feet until everyone in the group is going as fast as they can. Either end abruptly by throwing up your hands in the air and saying 'lightning' all at the same time, or end slowly by reversing the movements until everyone is again rubbing their hands together slowly.

Sun stretch. The facilitator asks participants to stand up and identify where the sun rises and where it sets. Ask participants to stretch their arms up, clasping their hands together with their index fingers pointing straight up. Point first towards where the sun rises and then trace towards where the sun sets, asking participants to stretch as high up as they possibly can.

Yoga stretches. Ask participants to stand up and take a deep breath in while stretching their arms above their heads. Breathe out while flying your arms down to your legs and bringing your head as close to your knees as possible. Breathe in again and raise your back just until it is straight and forming a right angle with your body. Breathe all the air out of your lungs and again lower your head until it is close to your knees. Slowly roll your spine up until you are again standing straight. Have participants hold their arms straight out and make small circles and then big circles, first forward and then backwards. Challenge participants to balance on one leg, and the other. For an additional challenge, have participants try to balance while first holding their arms in a 'Y' shape above their heads and then by closing their eyes at the same time.

Recap and review:

Throw the ball. Participants stand in a circle. Facilitator throws a ball to one participant and asks them to share a lesson or key thought from the session. Once the participant has shared, the facilitator asks them to throw the ball to someone else.

What inspired you? The facilitator asks participants to say something that inspired them from the session and how they will use it in their own lives. The facilitator should keep it short and make sure to take input from a several participants, switching who is asked lesson to lesson.

Paper on the floor. Participants write a key message or key point they have learned during the session on a piece of paper and then place it on the floor. Each participant then picks a different card and reads it out loud to the others.

Bus stop. Participants are split into groups. Each group stands in a different place or corner and is assigned a different topic from the session to discuss. They take two minutes noting the key lessons from the topic and then move on to the next 'stop.' This continues until all groups have visited all 'stops.'