

Peer-reviewed papers

Trainers conference

Practical ideas for stimulating quality in training

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Abstract

This article is a summary of ideas for stimulating the quality of training that we have collected from personal experiences, from our colleagues and associates and especially from all the skilful trainers at the SFCT trainers conference in Frankfurt in October 2011. We were fascinated by the rich variety of pedagogical and ingenious activities!

This is a step in collecting and building on what is 'out there' in training settings and not a complete list of how to train. Our focus is general and practical, stemming from the SF trainings we have experienced and heard about. These trainings are mostly done within some specific professional field. Interestingly though, trainers in different fields tend to use similar ideas and techniques (Röhrig & Clarke, 2008, p. 5). Still, every field is unique and these ideas need to be translated and tailored to fit the field in question. For us, the measure of quality in training is the extent to which the teaching and the training supports the trainees learning to work in an SF way. So, from our perspective it's not enough to learn SF in the classroom. The trainees need to be able to use and transfer SF in their natural context.

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Main points for quality in training

1. Although we propose lots of ideas, our main message is the classical SF one: keep it simple. Analyse what's important here and now and what learning objectives fit. Take one step at a time.
2. Build trust within the group and create and maintain a good atmosphere. This can be regarded as the foundation for successful training, because then the trainees can participate fully, try new things, question things and learn effectively (Rauste von Wright et al., 2003, p. 62–63).
3. Use and build on the trainees' understanding, knowledge, learning styles, expectations, challenges, hopes and goals (Rauste von Wright et al., 2003, p. 162–164). This makes the training congruent with the SF substance of the training. SF can in this way be used as a pedagogical model.
4. Be practical and teach via the trainees' work: create concepts and practise experiences together, learning by doing, use lots of examples. Emphasise skills building.
5. Regard yourself as a facilitator and coach. Set the stage. Provide the right resources at the right time. Put the trainees to work. Lead the process: push, slow down, engage, encourage, challenge the trainees to think. Reflect to create meaning and make conclusions (Dewey, 1921, p. 21–32).

Practical ideas for quality in training

In this section, training is regarded as a process with three phases. Before (preparation), during (teaching/training/learning) and after (documentation, follow up).

Part I: Before

The learning and teaching processes start with the preparations. In fact, important decisions regarding focus and setup are most often decided before the training starts.

SF has lots of good ways to create positive anticipation and use pre-session change, both of which can be used for teaching and learning purposes.

- Make an overview of the field/the big picture and outlines of what will/may be covered.
- Get to know the grammars of your participants' field.
- Have taster events for people to get to know you and the training. Check the situation and goals of trainees by organisational and/or personal interviews. In leadership training, talk to the team about what would be useful to participants. In clinical training, talk to the users.
- For in-house training: meet the organiser/HR/management and gather information about what we are aiming at and the groups that will impact and be impacted by the training. Ask the management how they will know that the training justifies their investment in it. Talk to the participants inviting questions, concerns, issues, expectations, what works, what could be better, what would be better if we met a year after the training? Identify a "support group" inside the organisation (multipliers).
- Send a welcome letter a week before to create expectations. Include links/reading/contact information. Invite people to get in touch if there's something they want to talk about. Quote previous participants. Request them to bring a symbol of something they like, or have been successful in. Encourage them to think about how the course could help them in their work and the benefits to them, their team, the organisation and their clients. Give a list of participants' names.

Part II: During the training

In this section, we describe various ways to stimulate quality during the active training period. The chosen topics are similar in both therapy and coaching descriptions. Our thinking is that all SF work is to some extent connected with

learning and personal development (Helander, 2000, p. 6–7). We also address how to conduct the training in such a way that the trainees can use what they learned in their natural environment and how to tell if trainees have learned the attitude, the techniques and how to use their skills in an SF way.

During – Create and maintain a good learning atmosphere

We think that having a good learning atmosphere is of vital importance, creating trust and respect for the trainees and between participants. As a rule of thumb, we would like to view the trainer as a good ‘host’, who cares for the physical and positive social environment and is prepared, inspiring and safe.

- Set up the room and have the material ready. Make name tags, personalise them with symbols, learn the names, use fun surprises, games and stories. Give a welcome gift – candy on the chair or something similar.
- Be a good host: know who you are expecting. Greet everyone with eye contact. Bring late-comers rapidly up to date.
- Use and learn to read body-language. Reflect on what you are doing when you/the others are interested.
- Be mindful of your credibility with the group. Be yourself.
- Check and build trust between all; share experiences and skills. Encourage lots of constructive feed-back. Keep aware of what’s going on with the trainees. Trust the group. Acknowledge and normalise differences. Help to solve conflicts between participants and to save face!
- Stay in sync with your and the participants’ desires and engagement. Use it to get further and deeper into the learning. Ask what to do if you feel there’s not enough energy. Save time by using a subgroup to ‘take the temperature’.

- Engage with trainees’ projects. Give them enough time to deal with their own issues, conversations and networking.
- Have lots of breaks, use them for reloading and refocusing.

During -The trainee reaches his/her goals for the training

Most trainers recognise the value of using goal-thinking and powerful questions with positive presuppositions in a classic SF manner, which can easily be used for both strategic and individual goals (Röhrig & Clarke, 2008, p. 129–190).

In our experience, the extent to which trainers actually use or address the trainees’ goals during the training varies. A regular focus on goals and how they develop and emerge during the training is important, as well as a curiosity about how unexpected events and surprises are received.

- Talk about “hopes + dreams”. Create personal goals. Use diaries in longer training courses.
- Focus narrowly on strategic group goals and directions with them. Be curious of progress in other areas as well.
- Follow up on progress. Check goal relevance in longer training programmes. Have external progress evaluation.
- Use peer feedback as ‘resourcers’ to monitor progress, where one idea may be the ‘clues-sheet’. Give trainees the SFCT “Clues”-sheet, or use similar ways to monitor learning progress.
- Frequently encourage them to reflect on how they will use their learning back at work.

During – Use the trainees’ resources in learning

SF trainings are often characterised by openness for an emerging learning process. Acknowledge the trainees’ resources and experiences and make space for them. This principle creates a culture in most long term trainings, where the trainees are active agents in influencing the training and making it a collaborative process.

Today there is a spectrum of how much this should be done, where some trainers think this idea is used too much and others want even more of the ‘walk the talk’ where the trainees are experts in their own learning. We have seen excellence in training all along this spectrum.

- Assume that you have all learning styles in the room. Use them for structure & content.
- Use trainees’ knowledge, by asking how they managed in particular situations.
- Use the trainees’ context and examples in teaching. Create new structures of learned ideas together with trainees. Invite the group to reflect on what has happened. How a method can be varied, discuss what works.
- Use progress evaluation to monitor training, pace, content, structure. Change the agenda and goals when needed.

During – Have a thought-through structure

Although SF trainings often have general common goals and ambitions, the variety of structure is huge and experienced trainers use different approaches for creating structure. Most trainers seem to emphasise hands-on learning, reflection, peer feedback activities and lots of feedback from the trainees.

- Make deliberate choices between surprise and conscious learning. Both have their merits.
- Keep variety. Be flexible.
- Short exercises to create curiosity and motivation. Longer to learn skills and procedures.
- After exercise: what did you like? What should have been better? Type the feedback on powerpoint slides and send them to participants as a co-creation of a thriving process.
- Give homework if appropriate and feedback from the teacher in longer training. 1:1 coaching by phone for participants between sessions/modules.

- Utilise notes; personal notebooks; what's useful for me. Post-it notes with OK messages whenever trainees find something to write throughout the training. Share with each other and 'steal' ideas of fellow participant.

During – SF core learning themes

Core learning themes are the SF paradigm contextualised in the bigger picture of approaches. What we propose here is a collection of themes which seem to be used frequently by many trainers. There is no commonly agreed definition of the themes.

- SF in the bigger picture of theories and methods. Similarities and differences. The transparency of the SF approach.
- Attitude and Context: create and work within a respectful, non-blaming, creative and co-operative relationship, including positive reframing (problems to goals, worry to hope, negative labels to behaviour, victim to survivor, negative feelings to possibilities).
- Resources: use and enhance hope, engagement and positive emotions (situational, bodily, eudemonia, growth, values, feedback, encouragement).
- Relationship and Interaction: systematic, dialogical, creative and situational (*carpe diem*) interaction that opens different perspectives and possibilities. The moment to moment steps of co-construction.
- Ideals and goals: tap in to the visions, hopes and ideals of the customers. Helping customers to form well-formed goals. Use scaling.
- Problems and Safety: give appropriate time for customers to express worries and troubles. Explore serious danger, harm and risks and ensure safety for all involved in these situations. Help customers do something different in problem situations to progress towards their goals.
- Progress, steps: help the customers make progress by

defining small actionable steps, use scales, give appropriate tasks and suggestions.

- Ending work and evaluation: summarise, reflect, evaluate, correct and end the working process appropriately.

During – The trainee can use his/her knowledge in her natural environment (work)

SF can be taught focusing on developing trainees' skills and craft. It requires that the training takes into account trainees' environments, involves experiments and tests within them (Helander, 2000, p. 91). This means that the trainees have made up some sort of personal 'work theory' for themselves, which is much more than just learning how to use SF-tools, for instance (Schön, 1987, p. 36–37) .

- Training can be seen as a pre-event. Then come the event and post-event activities. Take the whole continuum into account.
- People are thinking in an SF way, so they can respond sensibly to all kinds of situations.
- The trainee has been able to make a personal theory.
- Use homework in work situations.
- Encourage testing learned ideas. Discuss what happened.
- Encourage people from the same workplace to support each other. Help to develop support structures, like SF gestures to use within the team or regular peer reflections to keep up the learning.

During – Ways to know if trainees know how to use SF

Many trainers would like the trainees to discover the unique features and ideas of SF and not only learn the techniques 'mechanically' (Röhrig & Clarke, 2008, p. 310). The question is how to achieve this and how to know whether trainees have got it.

- Awareness to notice personal acting in situations.
- Forms a supportive and client centred alliance.
- Interacts in a way that opens up new possibilities.
- The three core SF principles: do more of what works; don't fix it if it isn't broken; if it doesn't work, do something different, can be traced in natural (work) situations.
- Concentrates on strengths, success and solutions and recognises and takes serious problems into account as well.
- Uses positive emotions, feedback and encouragement.
- Works with concrete language and behaviour.
- Can explain how and why he/she has used certain SF tools in real cases.

During – Ending

Ending is in a way the reverse of the beginning. A well-executed ending can however add something more to the training – perhaps a new beginning as shown below.

- Ask what was useful, interesting, touching and what could be better.
- Ask what they might/will do in the following weeks.
- Check whether the intended ending is appropriate for the trainees. How the goals have been achieved.
- Compare the beginning with the end. What has changed. What surprises happened.
- Ask support groups, leaders and other stakeholders for progress and feedback.
- Celebrate the progress and end.

During – Examination

Many longer training courses involve different kinds of examination or certification models. The standards are sometimes set by regulatory authorities. Others are developed by training institutes. There is a wide diversity and even criticism against

standardised examination among trainers and training institutes. Some of the criticism is that SF trainers put a lot of responsibility on the trainees to learn what they like and some trainers see authoritarian exams as non-SF. Hopefully more new and SF-style examinations will develop in the coming years.

- Evaluation and examination of personal SF projects (on video) during longer trainings. Feedback during and after each training session. Individual monitoring of progress.
- Evaluation/observation by a visiting SF trainer.
- Evaluation of tele-coaching + 3 Live coaching days.
- Certification seminars: 2 day intensive skill-building and skill-review seminars.
- Trainers or peers are able to trace the ‘tools’ in trainees’ work.

Trainer gets concrete feedback of SF used to the satisfaction of trainees, workplace and others involved, like in the SFCT review process (SFCT, 2012).

Part III: After

Trainees often request support and continuing peer contact. Below is a variety of simple and creative means to achieve this. One important note is to make a start before or immediately after finishing the course!

- It is crucial to have support afterwards. Training provides 10% of behaviour change. Coaching or supervision later may multiply this many times.
- Create opportunities and encouragement to use the training to talk about it and to reflect on it – provided by organisation, management and colleagues. Send the co-created power points to use as they wish and to tell others about it.
- Check usability and sustainability, for example with

questionnaires, follow-up calls, open teleconferences, email discussions, follow-up days or meetings.

- Set some tasks after the training. Ask ‘What will you do as a next step?’
- Get feedback and encourage support from colleagues, clients on skills (refer to clues sheet).
- 6–12 months follow-up support has proven useful.
- Collect and circulate success stories. Make a Facebook group for them.
- Costumer feedback form: what’s different after 2 weeks?

Concluding notes

In this article we have described in general terms how trainers can stimulate quality in various training settings. Looking back at the text, most points describe how much of the training can be done in a collaborative way, as a joint venture. The user perspective can be strong in any SF training. At the same time we think that the trainer is often regarded as a role model, even master, from whom the trainees try to learn. This is emphasised by the practical setup of trainings and maybe from tradition. Many trainers of today have learned their skills from watching the originators at work.

Thinking and practice in SF training seem to have connections to several pedagogical theories, like constructivistic pedagogy, accelerated learning, pragmatism, experiential and experimental learning theories. They are not talked about much amongst SF trainers. It could be useful to look into them and other viable theories to get more quality into training.

Most of the described tools in this article are analogues to those used in therapy, professional supervision and coaching. – Good news for all of us working in all of these contexts! – Are these contexts really that much the same? Is learning a core component in all of them? Is this a further example of the generic nature of SF?

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