



Curriculum for Empowering Self-Advocates Volume 3 Notes to Facilitators

Facilitating a Successful Course

Welcome to “Empowering Self-Advocates”

“Empowering Self-Advocates” was designed to help individuals with developmental disabilities to acquire information, skills, and tools to support them to exercise increased control over their own lives and create the quality of life they prefer. People with developmental disabilities may have few opportunities for choice-making to assert their preferences. By facilitating the “Empowering Self-Advocates” course, you play a vital role in supporting people to develop skills to shape their lives in ways that are satisfactory and meaningful to them.

People with developmental disabilities may have a sense of personal inadequacy and they may question their own abilities. They likely have experienced many situations in their lives that were labeled as failures. This may form barriers to learning. As the Facilitator, you can overcome these barriers by providing lots of encouragement, telling people there are many ways to use the skills they learn, and that everyone will work together to help one another build self-confidence in using the new skills.

“Empowering Self-Advocates” is intended to be a participant-driven course. In other words, the participants have the most significant role in determining the content and pacing of the course. The Facilitator should solicit from the participants frequent input on their learning needs and preferences, such as which topics to cover, what skills to learn, and how to practice those skills. It is up to the Facilitator to adapt the materials and strategies to honor the needs and wishes of the participants.

The Facilitator should feel free to invite guest speakers or others to assist in presenting specific portions of the course. It would be especially powerful to recruit one or more co-presenters from the class itself or from a self-advocacy group.

Because it is participant-driven, popular education was chosen as the instruction model for “Empowering Self-Advocates.” Remember, the power is vested in the participants, not the Facilitator.



Using the Popular Education Model

Popular education is described by John Hurst as “the empowerment of adults through democratically structured cooperative study and action.” Canadian educator Doris Marshall has said that popular education is “ordinary people...feeling their own worth and seeing the same worth in other people.”

In popular education, the lessons and materials are derived from the concrete experiences of the participants. Popular education addresses issues of importance to the class participants. It seeks to build on the collective knowledge of the group, and is highly participative.

Popular education grew through movements that were intended to equip people with tools (such as literacy) to enact social and political change. In “Empowering Self-Advocates” we strive to help people acquire the tools they need to assume greater control in their lives, and to impact systems and services to the extent they desire.

This model was selected for “Empowering Self-Advocates” because:

- It is based on what the participants are concerned about at the time
- It values what participants already know through their life experiences
- It encourages the participation of everyone in the group
- It includes people’s emotions, actions, and creativity
- It assists participants to assimilate new information by placing it in the context or framework of what they already know
- It empowers the participants by increasing their self-confidence and validating their contribution to the collective knowledge of the group.

“Empowering Self-Advocates” uses an informal version of the Popular Education model. The steps, diagramed below, are:

1. The Facilitator starts each main topic by drawing out the participants’ knowledge, encouraging them to share what they already know, believe, or have experienced related to the topic.
2. The Facilitator helps the participants to recognize common issues or themes in their experiences or understanding of an issue.
3. New information and ideas are then added, through discussion of handouts included in the curriculum, presentations by guest speakers as appropriate, other input from participants, or information from other resources.

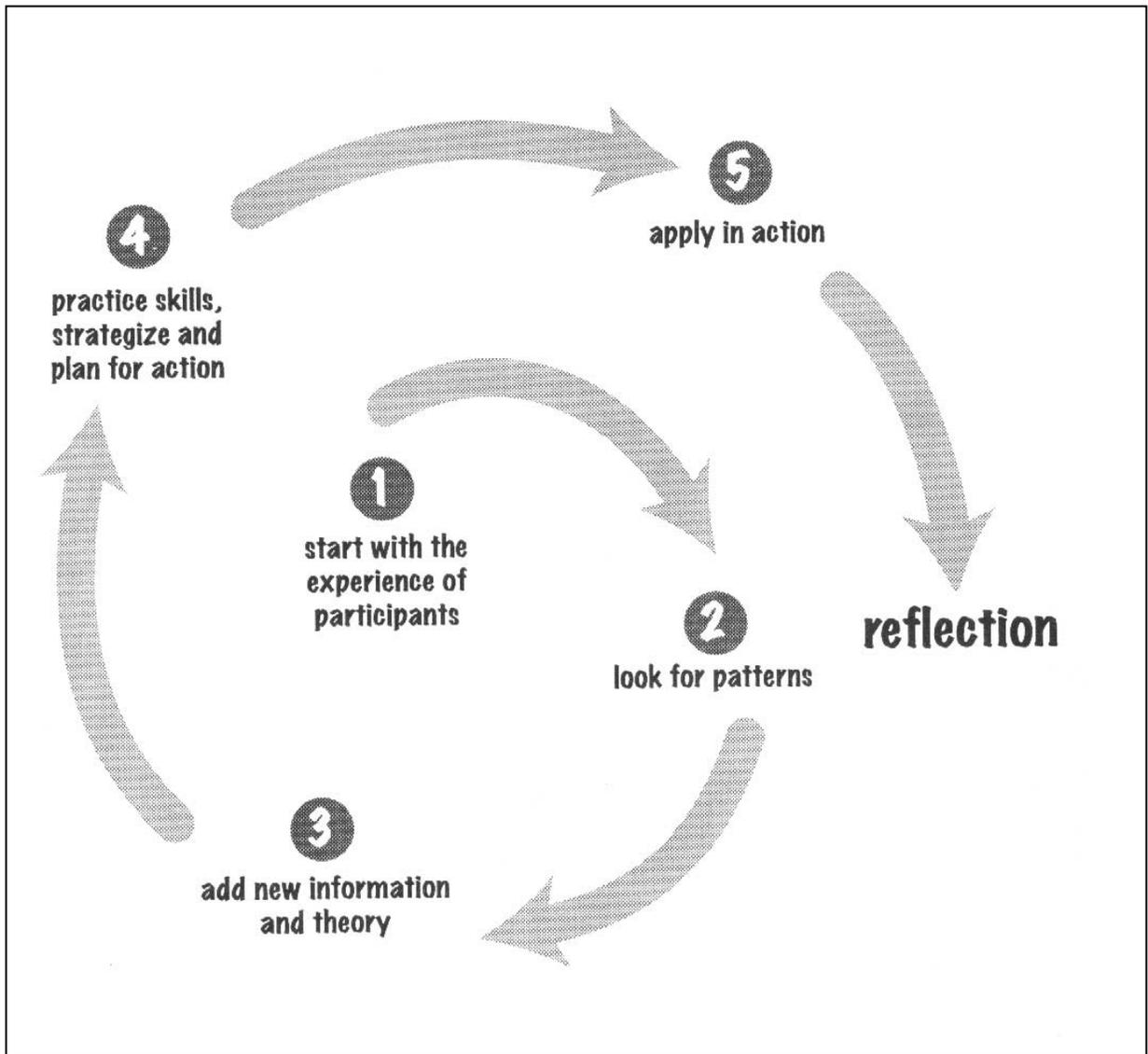


4. Next, the Facilitator encourages the practice of new skills or use of new information. Participants may want to plan out or role play how they can apply the new skills or information to specific situations.
5. Participants then apply the new information or skill in their lives as they have planned or practiced.
6. When participants return to subsequent classes, the Facilitator assists them to reflect on the outcomes of their use of the skills or information. This process presents another opportunity for the participants to learn from one another, to take responsibility for making adjustments to future uses of the information or skill, and to recognize their own successes.

The Facilitator will want to be flexible and adapt the use of the model to the needs of the participants and the specific topic under discussion. Certainly there may be times when a more traditional style of teaching is warranted. In general, though, the Facilitator should seek to use the popular education model as much as is appropriate, since the use of this model furthers the goal of enhancing the participants' capacity for self-advocacy.



The Popular Education Model





Your Role as Facilitator

The Facilitator has a unique job in “Empowering Self-Advocates.” Your purpose is to spark the group’s learning experiences. You should seek to help them acquire and apply new information, recognizing that they are in charge of their own learning. You are not so much a teacher in the traditional sense as you are guide and supporter.

Your role includes:

- a. Asking questions to encourage discussion by the participants. Prompt the group by exploring: How do they feel about a certain issue? Have they personally been affected in some way? What do they think about certain events, attitudes, laws, etc.?
- b. Drawing out the experiences of the participants. Encourage broad participation. Discuss and validate what the participants have to share -- the examples or stories from their own lives.
- c. Helping participants to identify common themes or issues among the experiences they relate. Are there patterns or similarities?
- d. Acting as a resource. Provide new information in the form of handouts, oral presentations, discussions, presentations by guest speakers, etc. If feasible, encourage the participants themselves to seek out answers from credible sources.
- e. Helping participants to apply what they’ve learned. Ask: How can you use this skill in the future? Next time you’re in a similar situation, how can you use what we’ve learned today? Consider using role plays so participants can rehearse the use of new skills or information.
- f. Supporting reflection. Engage the participants in sharing their experiences using new information or skills since the last class meeting. What were the circumstances in which they applied what they learned? What were the outcomes? How satisfactory were the outcomes? What was difficult? What was easy? What might the participants do differently next time?

Your role as Facilitator is intended to be in partnership with the group. You are not expected to be the expert in any particular area. You should look forward to learning alongside the participants as you ask questions, guide discussions, provide direction and resources, and support their learning.

Remember that it is important in this kind of course to be flexible in the lesson content as well as the facilitation style. Some topics may need a very structured presentation, others can be covered with a more fluid and informal approach. Try to be attuned to the needs, experiences, skills, and interests of the participants. Each group will be unique.



Also keep in mind that there may be more material included in the lessons than is practical or appropriate for a specific group of participants or meeting schedule. Adapt the content to your group. Pick and choose what you address; there's no need to use every lesson or every activity. Select the activities most relevant to the needs and interests of your participants. In some situations, you may want to encourage the participants to refer to some of the handouts when they have an opportunity in the future, rather than going over the details of each handout in class. As an alternative, you may ask for one or more volunteers to preview the handout(s) for a specific lesson, then present the highlights to their classmates at a later time.

Please note that some of the lesson plans suggest things to say to the participants. These phrases are shown in quotation marks. They are not intended to be spoken literally, but are included to give you an idea of the kind of statement, question, or instruction that needs to be given. The phrases should not be read or recited verbatim. Make the phrases your own by putting them in your own words.

Obtaining on-going feedback from the participants will allow you to make appropriate adjustments to respond to their needs. It also reinforces for the participants that their perspectives are valued, and that the Facilitator is committed to ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of the course. The Facilitator can ask a small group of participants to volunteer as a focus group to give feedback at specific times during the course, or you can engage the group as a whole in periodic discussion of questions such as:

- What information or skills have been helpful? Unhelpful?
- What information or skills need more explanation?
- What would help you learn the skills better?
- Are you ready to move on to new information?
- Are the skills and information sufficiently related to your needs?
- What would you like to do more of? Less of?
- What would you like to continue?

The Facilitator should plan to get feedback from the participants in the form of evaluations at the end of the course. A suggested evaluation form is included in this chapter. Some participants may not have had a lot of experience completing workshop evaluations like this. You may want to demonstrate how to complete the evaluation, explaining the use of the Likert scale (the set of statements for which participants indicate their attitudes on a scale of "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). You can support the participants by asking them to be candid in their responses, and assuring them that there are no negative consequences for giving critical feedback. If your participants are not comfortable with individual paper-and-pencil activities such as this, you may be able to ask support staff to sit in and assist individuals, you can ask a co-worker to conduct an oral response evaluation with the group entire, or you can devise another method of gathering feedback. You will get a sense of



what mode will work best for your participants. The evaluation process is important because it gives you information on changes you may want to make in the future; this allows the participants' experiences to benefit future classes, and reinforces for the participants that their opinions and perspectives are valued.

Some Elements of Successful Facilitation

- a. Introductions. Whether the participants know one another or not, introductions are important to warm people up and to set a participatory tone. If participants aren't acquainted with each other, ice-breaker activities in small groups or pairs are helpful. Activity 1-1, Meeting One Another, addresses introductions at the beginning of the course. If new participants join the group partway through the course, return to this activity to help draw in the new participants.

You may also want to consider warm-up or teambuilding activities each time the class meets. This can help the participants to reconnect with one another, to strengthen the bonds they are forming, and to set aside concerns and get their minds ready to focus.

- b. Safety. Make sure that the group agrees on ground rules for how they will work together (Activity 1-2). You should seek to ensure that the agreements are followed. If the group has trouble adhering to their agreements, take time to discuss this with them and see what adjustments or revisions they want to make. Be especially alert to participant actions that demean, embarrass, or threaten others in any way. You should seek to ensure that the self-esteem of each participant is preserved.
- c. Participation. Everyone needs to get a chance to share. This is essential for validating their existing knowledge and the value they bring to the group. Encourage, but don't force, everyone to have a voice. If one or two people seem to be dominating the discussion, try asking for ideas "from anyone who hasn't spoken yet," to prompt shy or more introverted participants. Ask for alternate ideas, perspectives, or opinions, to validate and draw out opposing views.

Vary the learning experiences in the activities (such as using small group discussion and reporting back to the full group, for example), if quieter participants seem hesitant to speak. Some people may need time to feel comfortable with the group before they are ready to speak aloud.

You may want to offer other opportunities for participation, such as helping with recording discussion responses on flipcharts, being in charge of meeting materials, keeping a record of attendance, etc.



Some participants may be less verbally expressive or articulate than others. Be sure to allow for alternative forms of communication. Become familiar with communication equipment or techniques used by participants in the group.

Note that almost all of the activities in “Empowering Self-Advocates” will work best with the participants seated around a table or in a circle facing one another. This gives everyone the opportunity for eye contact and encourages the group to be responsive to the cues of others as the activities progress.

The Facilitator can also help participants who don’t read to feel comfortable. The handouts in each session can be copied on different colors of paper, and the Facilitator can refer to any graphics on the handout as well as the color. This way, the participants can be sure to have the appropriate handout in front of them during each discussion.

- d. Validation. Many people do not believe that what they have to offer is of value to others. Respond in a positive way to each contribution. Helping the group to see similarities in their experiences will enable them relate to one another and to acknowledge the importance of what each person has to say. When summarizing, try to use the words of the group or the individual participant, so the group recognizes its own work and doesn’t feel superseded by the Facilitator’s vocabulary.
- e. Time management. Be sure that the group agrees on the time allotted for the activities and for each session. Keep track (or invite participants to volunteer to act as timekeepers) and let them know where they are in the time allotted for each activity. Any significant adjustments to the time should be agreed upon by the group.
- f. Conflict. It is much more important for people to share their perspectives and experiences, than it is for everyone to agree. If conflicts arise, you should acknowledge them, and ask the group how they want to address the situation. Review the purpose of the activity and involve the participants in deciding whether to adjust the schedule to pursue the differing opinions or make note and move on. Or, they may want to set aside time during a future session to come back to the issue. Make sure the choice is that of the group entire, not just one person. If necessary, remind the group of their agreements that apply to the situation, such as respect for differences.

These are not hard and fast rules, but guidelines to help you and the group accomplish their goals. There is no single right way to facilitate a group. A great deal of information is available in bookstores and on the Internet. It’s okay to be spontaneous and to improvise as you go along. Recall that the Facilitator doesn’t have to be an expert; if you get stuck, draw on the wisdom and creativity of the participants. Remember, it’s their class, and every opportunity they have to be involved in decision-making about the class is an opportunity for them to practice skills of empowerment.



Providing New Information

In many activities in “Empowering Self-Advocates,” the Facilitator will add new information to the participants’ existing knowledge base. Appreciate that the participants will come from various backgrounds and experiences. Each person is an individual with his or her own strengths and needs, self-concept, and attitude about learning. All of your participants are capable of learning, but memory, abstract concepts, and generalization can be especially challenging for people with developmental disabilities. Here are ten suggestions for helping the participants to acquire new information.

1. Adhere to the popular education structure for each class session, but don’t create a rigid environment. Some predictability in the sequence of events in the class will contribute to the participants’ comfort level. But remain flexible and responsive to the participants’ energy levels and attention spans.
2. Repeat key ideas often. Use opportunities to reiterate key points in other settings, if you have a relationship with the participants outside of class meetings. Stay on a topic until the participants feel comfortable with it, rather than insisting on progressing through the curriculum according to a set time frame. Move ahead when the participants feel they have learned the new information and can perform the new skills appropriately and to their own satisfaction. But don’t exceed the participants’ tolerance for new information or repetition at any one session; switch gears and come back to a topic later as need be.
3. Use visual aids as much as possible. Use visual images or symbols that are familiar to the participants. Read the handouts to the participants, or ask a volunteer to read. Copy the handouts on various colors of paper, so that participants who do not read are able to have the appropriate handout in front of them as it’s being presented.
4. Model the skills. For example, think out loud and go through the problem-solving steps when you face a problem in the class.
5. Provide lots of practice opportunities. Most people learn better by doing than by just hearing. Structure the practice activities in accordance with the participants’ wishes and needs. The Facilitator should ask the participants frequently how they would like to get more practice (role play, rehearsal, etc.), and then adapt the activities appropriately.
6. Encourage participants to ask questions. If you don’t know the answer, offer to research the issue between class sessions, or offer to support one of the participants in finding an answer.
7. Keep the material as logical and concrete as possible. Break the material or skill into discrete, identifiable steps. Always relate the information back to the participants’



experiences and needs. Illustrate the concepts with stories from your own life if possible. Use props or other items familiar to the participants when illustrating the concepts. Be sure to clarify the meaning of new vocabulary, and use the new terms often in appropriate context. Provide a glossary of new terms if needed.

8. Give lots of positive feedback and encouragement. Convey to the participants your belief in their capabilities. Communicate your confidence in them. Don't allow criticism or ridicule. Many people with developmental disabilities are unfamiliar with feelings of success, and may not recognize success when they achieve it. Let them know when they have accomplished a skill, and be liberal with reinforcement.
9. Acknowledge their anxiety. Learning environments may be stressful to many participants. Offer plenty of breaks. Be sure to keep it fun! Don't insist that everyone participate in every activity if there are some people who would prefer sometimes to just watch.
10. Learn from your participants about their strengths, and look for alternative ways to present information to increase learning. If possible, use a variety of other people and other settings to convey information or demonstrate skills.

Very often, people with developmental disabilities are in settings in which they are expected to be compliant. They may be heavily reinforced for compliance with instructions or directions from others. In fact, training to improve compliance is a common in-service topic for staff who work with people with developmental disabilities. Explicitly teaching the concepts and skills of self-determination may be challenging for the Facilitator. Don't get discouraged. You are doing important work that will have an immense impact on the participants' satisfaction with their lives for years to come.



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