

PRA/PLA training

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Introduction

Most trainers have their own style of training and their unique selling propositions. Depending on the trainer, there are considerable variations in the way PRA/PLA training workshops are conducted with regard to objectives, coverage, fieldwork, topical emphasis, style and ways of learning. With regards to PRA/PLA training, some training tips based on formal and informal feedback from different quarters are described below.

Sometimes 'writing' has the edge over 'talking'

In any training-workshop, some participants are shy and rarely express their views in public. Sometimes participants from hierarchical organisations attend training sessions with their senior colleagues and often feel reluctant to articulate their views in front of them. This is particularly true of participants from governmental organisations and donor agencies. The trainer needs to be aware of such situations and identify the possible constraints to communication that exist within the groups concerned. One simple way to overcome this is to suggest that participants *write their views on pieces of paper*, whether anonymously or otherwise. This method has been effective in workshops conducted in China, India, Vietnam and Bangladesh and has helped participants to express their views more effectively. The other method used in these situations is *small group discussions*, with mixed groups of participants. This can help to create space for participants to overcome their inhibitions. Depending on levels of hierarchy existing within the set of trainees, the writing method can be combined with the small group discussion method for influencing attitude and behaviour.

Preaching and practising by trainers

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that PRA/PLA involves value-based training. Many participants view the trainer as a role model and any deviation of the trainer from this perspective may affect the image of the trainer in trainee's mind. It may also affect the desired 'change' envisaged through the training course. This puts considerable responsibility on the trainer to practice those values which s/he 'preaches' during the training event itself. It is very important for the trainer to have time for self-reflection; that they are aware of their own limitations

and biases and hence, can seek ways of overcoming them. Many participants would like to see a 'perfect' trainer in order to imbibe the ways and practices of the trainer themselves. Any deviation from that risks scrutiny and judgement by the trainees and consequentially, may affect the end-results of the training.

Pitching training at an appropriate level

In heterogeneous groups pitching training at an appropriate level can often be challenging. To start with a rapid training needs assessment can be useful in enabling the trainer to identify levels and kinds of training required, followed by a reality check. If most participants are more experienced and demand training to be pitched at a higher level, then those participants with less experience are put at a disadvantage and may often require special care and attention. However, if only a few participants are more experienced than others, the training can be pitched at a level with which many are comfortable. This has the added benefit of the more experienced participants being able to share their experiences, if useful, with the rest of the group.

Catching up with the latest

There is considerable hard work to be done by trainers behind the scenes. Field results are continuously pouring in and trainers need to keep abreast of the latest developments. Acquiring knowledge of innovative practice, learning ways and methods for practical solutions, self-reflection, updating skills etc., can help a trainer to perform better. Such activities help improve performance and are essential pre-requisites for sustaining the worthiness of a trainer.

Cultural compatibility and conflict resolution

A PRA/PLA trainer needs to appreciate cultural diversity and it is important to explore 'do-s' and 'don't-s', especially in different cultures. Understanding of cultural parameters helps a trainer adjust to the new environment and ultimately perform better. In any training for participants from different cultures, a trainer should respect cultural diversity and provide relevant training inputs. Participants from different cultural backgrounds generally like to learn about relevant PRA/PLA experiences relating to their own cultures. Hence, the trainer needs to

prepare an inventory of case studies from different regions to enable better absorption of the concepts and practice of participatory approaches by the participants themselves. When individual perspectives differ widely, skills in consensus building and conflict resolution often prove handy for any trainer, as conflicting perspectives are quite common in multi-cultural scenarios.

Peer group sharing as a method

For improving participation and quality of training, a trainer can encourage peer group sharing and presentation of field experience. Facilitating such peer reviews can be done in such a way that group learning becomes more meaningful. When each group shares its own experience and findings, the trainer can put it in a comparative framework so as to enable inter-group and intra-group comparisons. Peer group sharing is an effective tool for comparing and contrasting lessons from field experiences, both on an individual and group basis. In a learning process, participants' motivation levels often rise when they relate their field experience back to others. From this process, they can draw out key lessons, identifying what they have contributed to or which important points they may have missed. Furthermore, this also acts as a deterrent for those participants who consider themselves to be 'expert', as they face queries from other groups of participants.

'End-of- training' evaluation

Evaluation by participants at the end of the training course is an important way of finding out what they thought of the training. Often such sessions are done in a haphazard manner and not much time is devoted to reflection. Such evaluation can be more constructive and meaningful if adequate time is spent on practical assessment of the training programme itself along with sufficient focus on how to follow it up. Many of us, as trainers, are interested to hear good things about the training. However, an evaluation framework generally proves to be more effective, including plans for future action and ways for overcoming constraints. Such post-training feedback is more meaningful when broadly structured around its strengths, limitations, assessment of the trainer and course content, areas for improvement, scope for applications of the training etc. Though a staggered training programme in PRA/PLA is more effective, funding constraints and lack of time often force training to be a 'one-off' event.

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