

Report from the Facilitators' Forum

April 18, 2017

Many thanks to the 'anchors' at the Forum who kept notes from 16 very intense half-hour discussions. Their notes demonstrate that the Forum is a valuable opportunity for the facilitators to focus their attention on the nuts and bolts of their work and to share their experiences. The synopsis that follows also shows that there is widespread agreement about what is important and what works.

Maintaining the intellectual challenge

- The general consensus favoured consideration of the widest possible range of workshop topics, with the onus on the proposers to demonstrate to the Curriculum Committee that their workshop would meet the high standards of the Academy, though not necessarily in traditional academic terms.
 - *Every subject can be approached intellectually.*
 - *It's not the topic but how you approach it.*
 - *Not everything involves books.*
 - *Experiential learning is a valid alternative to academic learning.*
- The workshop survey happens too early – or there should be a second survey later in the year. The comments relating to the top-rated workshops in the survey should be studied by the Curriculum Committee for insights into their success, with the results circulated to all facilitators for their consideration.
- The Curriculum Committee might welcome workshop topics of interest to younger members.
- At every turn, facilitators carry much of the responsibility for maintaining high standards:
 - The design of the workshop schedule for the year must be focussed and rigorous, so that participants – newbies and veterans alike – are aware from the outset that there are high expectations.
 - Meeting with participants informally during the summer or just before classes start can be helpful not only in breaking the ice and establishing a friendly atmosphere, but also in setting expectations and generating enthusiasm for the topic by modelling your own passion for the subject.
 - Helping presenters to put their best foot forward necessitates consulting with each one well in advance of their presentation to get a reading and offer appropriate assistance. Some may need encouragement and mentoring, perhaps even a more experienced co-presenter or a format less threatening than the traditional 20 minute presentation. Some may need advice about research material, or help with audio-visual support. Encourage research that goes beyond Wikipedia and the internet to include more substantial material from books and articles found in libraries.

Encourage Power Point presentations that illustrate the topic with interesting, relevant visuals and stifle the use of hard-to-read text that simply duplicates the spoken word.

- Many presenters need guidance in time management! Encourage them to rehearse their presentations in advance and time them. Help them to understand that their presentation is just the first part of a whole program: it is an introduction to focus attention, generate controversy, and lead into a good discussion that includes everyone. Depending on the topic, discussion can be continuous through the presentation or held until the presentation is finished. It is important to work this out in advance because 'yanking' the rambling speaker with a bell is embarrassing for everyone.

- An open, enthusiastic approach on the part of the facilitator encourages everyone – newcomers and veterans alike – to develop confidence and a readiness to contribute to the common goal, which is simply a joint commitment to help each other learn.

- E-mail communication among workshop members - exchanging readings and noting local events that relate to the topic - can be a good way to promote interest and maintain intensity between sessions. Questions and readings that anticipate the next session can also help to maintain a high level of involvement.

- Being a good moderator can greatly increase the quality of discussions. "*Sheilagh's Technique*" describes the ability of a facilitator to recognize a good discussion-generating comment that might be worth lingering over. When you hear one, stop and ask for additional input and follow-up comments, before moving on to a new topic. Facilitators can also help discussions along by having questions ready to fill any gaps. Even the simplest questions can help, such as asking for comparisons or contrasts, or asking presenters what stood out the most for them in their exploration of the topic.

- An outline called "The Role of the Facilitator", prepared by the Curriculum Committee, is available under *Workshops* on the Academy website. *[Comments, additions and amendments will be welcomed, and the whole piece will be revised and up-dated this spring. Ed]*

Alternative Formats

- The expression *experiential learning* was used repeatedly to describe activities used effectively in certain workshops: field trips, quizzes, games, pro-con team debates and votes, role-playing, readings, crafts, formal debates and interviews were all cited as valid techniques for adding variety and depth to the workshop experience.
- Break out groups can be useful in encouraging the more timid to express their thoughts. Each group is asked to focus on one aspect of a subject, then report to the whole group, leading to general discussion.

- A similar concept asks several participants to research one aspect of an issue/ book/topic and make a brief presentation designed to lead into a general discussion. Both these formats demand careful coordination, but they do allow new, shy or reluctant presenters to undertake small presentations and build their confidence.
- The use of film clips, TED talks, docs and videos can be effective if used sparingly, so that they do not negate the Academy commitment to peer learning. Such resources offer essential back up material in the event of a presenter failing to show up at the last minute.
- Workshops could be held in alternate venues (ROM, AGO, Robarts), led by peers – sometimes in collaboration with volunteers from the host institution.
- The value of field trips is greatly increased if they can be quickly followed by discussions.
- Innovative arrangements for co-presenting need to be explored in order to reduce the concerns of new members intimidated by the idea of giving a full presentation. The goal is to reassure them, not eliminate the commitment to present! Such co-presentation formats would also help older members who are losing confidence in their abilities to present.
- Invited guests and outside speakers have been used to great effect, but always in context, again bearing in mind the commitment of the Academy to peer learning. Access to absent members and distant guests by video conferencing is an increasingly viable option.
- The Curriculum Committee could explore the potential for an interchange of workshop participants and presenters where topics and interests interact.

Additional Comments

- Each year, efforts are made to obtain the use of larger rooms at Knox, so far without success. A new principal takes office this summer and efforts will be renewed.
- The current sound systems in rooms 1 and 5 are at maximum capacity, so additional mics are not possible. Facilitators are requested to conduct lessons in using the mics at their first session in the fall. Training sessions in the use of Power Point, etc., will again be offered in the fall by the Tech Team, and each workshop will have a Tech Rep identified and trained to help participants activate the system for their presentations, to ensure that the equipment is working, and that it is stored safely at the end of each workshop. For more details contact Philip Wong (philip.wong.ca@hotmail.com) and watch for notices about upcoming classes on the website. For video conferencing help, contact Frank Nicholson (fnicholson@rogers.com).

- The need to protect members' contact information has necessitated the development of a privacy policy by the Academy (details on the website). Upon renewing or joining, members are now asked to consent to the use and publication of their email address for intra-Academy communication, but phone numbers and addresses are not used. Facilitators are warned that they must discuss privacy issues with their workshop members at an early stage, and obtain permission from each of them before collecting and circulating telephone numbers. Members have the right to withhold their permission.
- The Academy has formed an on-going team to study and respond to accessibility issues – mobility, hearing, seeing problems - that impede the full participation of members. Facilitators are asked to keep an eye out for such issues and to be aware of their members' needs, requesting participants to self-identify if they require extra help with a walker or a seat at the front to see/hear better.

J.M.

21/04/17