

MARCH 2021

## GOOD PRACTICE BRIEF

# ONLINE AND IN-PERSON FACILITATION

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

By intentionally eliciting and supporting learning from and among learners, a facilitator is able to share relevant information in digestible segments and engage learners in discussing core learning.

Leamer engagement can be created by establishing a safe space and norms for the group. The group may even co-create the space and the norms, in addition to identifying the learning priorities.

Tailoring content to match learners' needs, background, and experiences may be done through a needs assessment prior to the session or through other data collection that allows the facilitator to understand participant demographics.

### BACKGROUND

DDI/EDU is tasked with preparing USAID education staff to more effectively build capacity of education staff, influence policy design, and support systems in partner countries to achieve education goals. The EPIC Professional Development (PD) Team collaborated with subject matter experts (SMEs) and DDI/EDU contacts to design and deliver effective technical training that was relevant to the trends and priorities of the sector, the Agency, and DDI/EDU. The PD Team took a facilitation approach rooted in the principles of adult learning and engagement for both in-person and virtual meetings, workshops, webinars, and courses.

EPIC initially focused on designing in-person training, but the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a shift in focus to online learning modules and virtual instructor-led training for courses such as the Effective Education Portfolio Management (EPPM) Course and Education Overview Course. This shift necessitated consistent virtual planning meetings, up-to-date trackers, and organizational tools, and piloting virtual modalities for formerly in-person training opportunities.

### GOOD PRACTICE

#### CLARIFY THE FACILITATOR'S ROLE

EPIC has aligned the role of the facilitator with adult learning principles. According to EPIC's approach, the facilitator supports and elicits learning from and among learners. The facilitator guides learners toward learning by sharing clear and relevant information in digestible segments, engaging them in discussing core learnings, offering practice in applying information, and addressing questions and concerns in an appropriate manner. In a

virtual setting, the facilitator should work with a producer to ensure that technical needs and support are provided for the learning event.

The facilitator should be intentional about how they support and elicit learning. During a session, the facilitator should:

- Create space for the audience to identify their goals and interests in learning, to learn through doing, through discussion, and through other active participation in the learning process.
- View participants as a source of insight and knowledge, and peer learning and sharing as valuable methods for revealing contributions.
- Ask questions, paraphrase responses, and summarize discussion topics. These are all key facilitation skills and part of the facilitator's role.

All of these skills and techniques are relevant to both in-person and online facilitation. They promote active audience engagement and retention of information.

Finally, it is important to note that a facilitator is distinct from an SME.

- The **facilitator** guides the learning process. A facilitator's role is to provide good questions for individual and group exploration, learning, and discovery.
- An **SME** acts as a resource for information and experience. This person will usually provide answers, evidence, and good solutions.
- In the process of designing a learning event, an agreement should be made on whether or not the SME is comfortable taking on a facilitator role. If the SME is not comfortable, then their role remains as described above.

## CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

Under EPIC, learner engagement was created by establishing a safe space and norms for the group, and even allowing the group to co-create the space and the norms, as well what the learning priorities are. This was done through introductory plenary discussions that clearly laid out the norms and learning priorities and reserved space for participants to add their own norms and priorities. Participants should be viewed as a source of insight and knowledge, and peer learning and sharing as a valuable method for surfacing contributions. These conditions allow for community-, relationship-, and knowledge-building among learners. This may include:

- Icebreakers and introductions at the beginning of a session;
- Strategic use of energizers, brain teasers, and music to build camaraderie;
- Clearly laying out or eliciting group norms;
- Asking permission before recording an online session;
- Clarifying with whom audience questions and responses will be shared; and
- Providing multiple channels for questions and contributions.

Without a safe space and norms, it is difficult for the other pieces, such as active learner participation, to fall into place.

## ADAPT TO LEARNER NEEDS IN REAL TIME

Once a learning event moves from the design phase to the implementation phase, it is the facilitator's role to monitor and adjust the design based on learner needs. Under EPIC, facilitators used session breaks and daily

debriefs to discuss and make written adjustments to the training design document. If the audience requires more time to discuss a particular topic or to work through a small group activity, the facilitator needs to adjust the rest of the session to accommodate this. Adjustments may include:

- Changing the amount of time spent on a later activity;
- Altering or eliminating an activity later in the session;
- Reworking later sessions (for a multi-day course) to incorporate material left over from the current session; and
- In a virtual setting, changing the platform for activities if learners experience persistent technology issues or have trouble using the platform.

The facilitator should also be prepared to adapt their facilitation style to the audience. This may require adjusting their tone depending on how learners respond and/or adapting their approach to take into account a more introverted or extraverted audience.

## UNDERSTAND ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ONLINE FACILITATION

EPIC supported the design and facilitation of various online workshops, webinars, and courses across a range of platforms (Adobe Connect, Zoom, and Google Meet) over the course of its five-year contract. In addition, EPIC designed interactive activities including polls, virtual flipcharts, virtual living documents, and other learning spaces for a range of internal and external audiences at USAID. The two good practices below represent clear trends in EPIC's experiences with online facilitation.

1. **Access is Key:** When facilitating an online session, prioritize technology accessibility over greater functionality. For example, switching from Adobe Connect to Google Meet allowed more people to successfully participate in online learning sessions, including hour-long webinars and two-week virtual instructor-led courses. With the abundance of free and cheap virtual tools, it is always possible to work around the lower functionality of a learning platform. It is overly burdensome to work around accessibility issues.
2. **Accept Technical Difficulties:** During online sessions, technical difficulties will most likely occur in some form or other, either for the facilitator, the SMEs, or learners. Someone might lose their Internet connection, a participant may not be able to use the interactive tools, the facilitator's screen might freeze, etc. Acknowledge to learners that technical glitches will happen, and that this is okay. Should a technical issue occur, calmly let learners know (if possible) and continue with the facilitation of the session.

The production team and the facilitator should have a plan for how to handle technical difficulties (i.e., what to tell learners, who the point of contact is, how to get resources to participants outside of the online platform, and so on). Designate a go-to person and the means/channel to communicate problems when issues arise. Clear communication and preparation will help reduce the impact of these technical issues during the session and will allow learners to get the full benefit of the session regardless of how smoothly it runs.

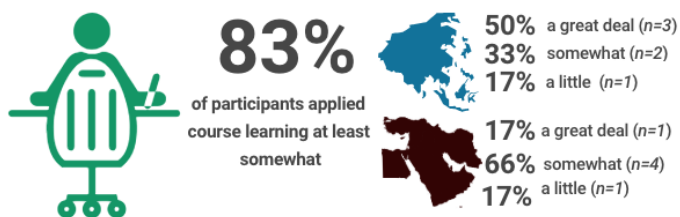
## OUTCOMES

Whether online or in-person, EPIC facilitators were clear about their role (and the roles of others on the design and production team), were mindful about creating the conditions for audience engagement, and tailored content to each unique audience. This resulted in learning sessions that ran smoothly and were both effective and engaging—in turn resulting in greater learning and its application. This also led to other members

of the design team, such as coordinators, producers, and/or SMEs, understanding what to do and when to do it with minimal stress or uncertainty. Participants felt like they attended an engaging, well-planned session that was relevant to their work. For example:

- In a 2018 follow-up survey for two in-person Ed-CVE trainings, 83 percent of respondents reported that the course was at least “somewhat relevant” to their work. This same number of respondents indicated that they applied their learning at least “somewhat.” The majority of respondents also reported that they shared the course learnings with others (Figure 1).
- A virtual instructor-led version of the EEPM and more than 15 webinars (and other virtual events) between March and November 2020 received feedback from presenters and participants that was largely positive and pointed to a successful adaptation of the approach to online settings.
- In the participant survey for the 2020 Global Education Learning Series (held online), 90 percent of respondents reported that the facilitators and presenters were “effective” or “highly effective.” Eighty-nine percent of respondents reported that the content was “relevant” or “very relevant” to the work they do. This is a significant outcome considering the diversity of the audience, which included internal and external partners, academia, and the private sector.

FIGURE 1. 2018 ED-CVE COURSE FEEDBACK



Providing effective learning opportunities through facilitated sessions was critical for the DDI/EDU to build the capacity of USAID education staff in the field and in Washington. Good facilitation led to the audience feeling better informed and equipped to successfully do their jobs. It also helped build a positive reputation for PD within DDI/EDU, which generated enthusiasm for training and growth among education staff.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### BE REALISTIC AND FLEXIBLE ABOUT TIME

When facilitating either in-person or online, keep in mind that transitioning a group from one activity to another takes time. Some activities may take longer than expected. When designing a session, be realistic about how many activities you can fit into a given time frame. When facilitating a session, be prepared to give learners more time for some activities than anticipated and to rework the agenda as needed.

### SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS FOR LEARNERS

When communicating with learners before and during a facilitated session, set clear expectations about pre-work, attendance, and participation. If learners are being asked to read and/or write something before the session, send them at least one email with clear instructions. If there are attendance requirements in order for learners to earn Continuous Learning Points, clearly communicate this in an initial email and remind them verbally at the beginning of the session.

Clear expectations are also key during the learning event. When you begin facilitating introductions, use that time to set expectations about participation as part of the group norms. If you are facilitating an online session, be clear about when and how you would like learners to use the chat, how they are able to ask questions and show agreement or dissent, and whether you would like their video cameras to be on or off during the session.

The EPIC PD team found that participants often needed to be reminded of these expectations, especially regarding webcam use during online learning events. Setting and reinforcing expectations during learning events is an important component of successful learning events, and should be institutionalized as a good practice for facilitators.

*This brief was created by Education Performance Improvement, Communications, and Knowledge (EPIC), a five-year activity (2015-2021) of support services to the Center of Education (DDI/EDU). EPIC consisted of activities in four key areas that were implemented simultaneously: performance improvement through organizational effectiveness; professional development, training, and learning for all staff; knowledge management, generation, brokering, uptake, and use; and internal and external communications, engagement, and partnerships.*