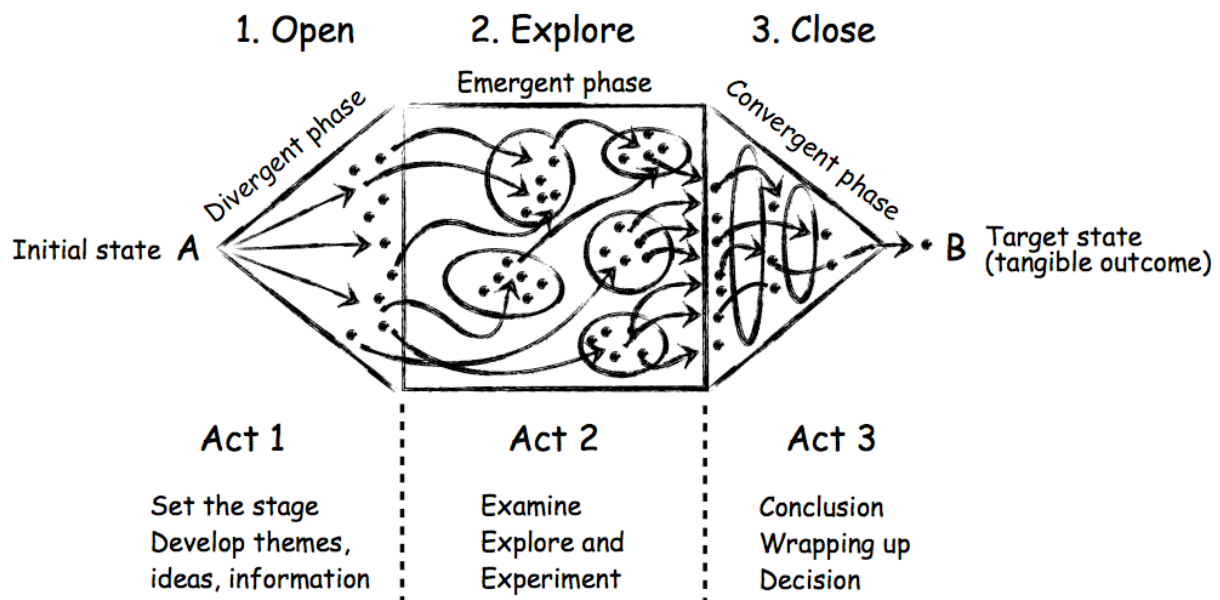




Preparing a Learning Experience

1. The three stages of a learning experience¹

A learning session is focused to a specific objective and involves three main stage : Opening, Exploring, Closing (see the diagram below).



Target state

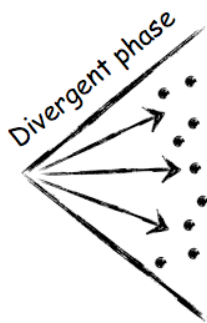
To design a training session you begin with the end in mind, i.e. the learning objective you want to reach. As we said beforehand, the objective should be tangible (SMART).

Initial state

We also need to know what the initial state looks like. What do learners know now? What they don't know? What resources do we have available?

¹ ¹ This part is inspired from "Gane Storming, A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers, and Changemakers, Dave Gray, Sunni Brown, James Macanufo. O'Reilly. 2010

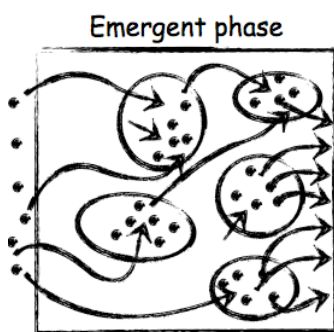
Opening



The first step of the training session, the first act, will be to set the stage: introducing the participants, introducing the objective, and developing the themes, ideas, and information that we need to start. This act 1 is all about *opening* - opening people's mind, opening up possibilities. It's about getting the people in the room, the cards on the table, the information and the ideas flowing. It should be an explosion of ideas and opportunities. It is not the time for critical thinking or skepticism; it's time for brainstorming, energy, and optimism. The keyword here is

"divergent" : you want the widest possible spread of perspectives. For this act, you probably have to start with a *presentation* to introduce the topic and the objective. Then, the best training methods may turn around *brainstorming*; you can as well use *role play* or *photo language* to help people express their experience the information they have, the problem they face, the expectations and ideas they have.

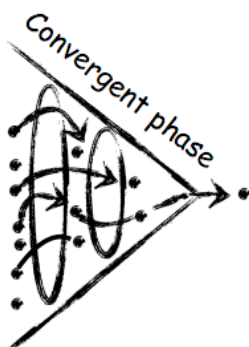
Exploring



Once you have the energy and the ideas flowing into the room, you need to do some exploration and experimentation. This is the second act. Participants will work on *case studies* or *experience sharing* to sift and sort through ideas, try to see old things in new ways, build and tests solutions, etc. The key word here is "emergent": we want to create the conditions that will allow unexpected, surprising, and delightful things to emerge. All the art of the trainer / facilitator is to find a learning activity allowing

exploration. It can be a *case study*, a *simulation game*, a *project*.

Closing



In the final act you want to move towards conclusions. This is time to assess ideas, to look at them with a critical or realistic eye. The aim is to select the conditions and components of good practice from the exploring phase : *What opportunities did we find out? Which of them are the most promising? What should be the next step?* The keyword for the closing act is "convergent":

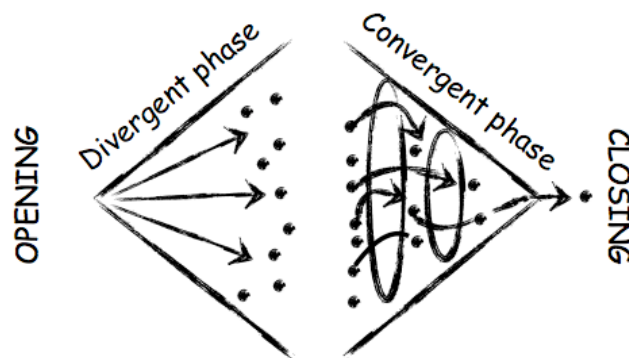
participants have to narrow the field in order to select the most promising things for whatever comes next. As facilitator you want to wrap up all the process highlighting the important things that emerged and that should be retained for action at home. The methods you can use in closing are : *group decision*, *decision making*, etc.

Importance of opening and closing

Opening and closing are particularly important for the trainer/ facilitator. They are the way you orchestrate the learning activities. Think about the opening and closing arguments in a court trial. The purpose of the opening is to establish a frame of reference, set the context, and lay out the themes that will be explored in the trial. The closing argument precedes and prepares the way for the jury or judge to make a decision.

Opening is just a beginning. To open is to get people thinking and spark their imaginations. To open you need to create a *comfortable environment*, where people feel invited and welcome so that they will open their minds and explore possibilities they may not have considered before.

Closing is about bringing things to a conclusion, moving from thinking mode into doing mode. It is about making choices and decisions.



Here are some risks to be aware of:

- **Don't open and close at the same time.** You can't be creative and critical simultaneously. When you are exploring creative possibilities you need to shut down the critical part of your mind (this is why the rule of *brainstorming* is "just propose as many ideas as possible without discussing or criticizing them"). When you are making choices, you should not try to be creative. Keep them separate and do them in order.
- **Close everything you open.** If you open something you must close it, or you will risk losing the energy of the group. Opening can feel overwhelming. If you open and don't close, people may feel as you have opened Pandora's box : there are too many opportunities and no plan to tackle them. If people do work in a breakout session, they will be disappointed if they don't have a chance to share it with others and you miss an important learning opportunity.

2. The bricks of a training session

Experience and dialogue

In a learning cycle (see handout "Active Learning and Learning Styles"), we have the opportunity to:

- Be engaged in action (doing)
- Observe and reflect (reflecting)
- Discover or develop concepts (connecting)
- See how to implement new actions (deciding)

We can identify two main kinds of experience and two main kinds of dialogue:

- **Experience**
 - ➔ *Observing*: the learners watch or listen to someone else doing something that is related to what their learning is about, for example observing children playing and interacting each others (direct observation), or watching a video film or reading a story about the experience of a group of children (vicarious observation).
 - ➔ *Doing*: any learning activity where the learners actually do something. For example organizing and leading a learning activity with children (direct doing), or preparing a handout explaining how to plan a learning activity for children (vicarious doing).
- **Dialogue**
 - ➔ *Dialogue with Self*: a learner is invited to think reflectively about a topic, i.e., to ask him or herself what they think or should think, what they feel about the topic, etc. This is thinking about one's own way of thinking.
 - ➔ *Dialogue with Others*: learners are invited to take part in small group discussion on a given topic. This help participants reconsidering their basic assumptions and reconnect their experience to new possible approaches and perspectives in order to articulate new possible guiding ideas.

Strengthening the interaction between experience and dialogue

To multiply the educational impact of active learning, we should use the four main learning experience in an interactive way.

For example, in a learning activity where the objective is to learn how to manage and solve conflict, the learners may have to:

1. Opening

- ➔ Think about a conflict they experienced and write their own thoughts on a sheet of paper (*Dialogue with self*);
- ➔ Take part in a group discussion (brainstorming) to share their information and their ideas about conflicts and conflict resolution (*Dialogue with others*)

2. Exploring

- ➔ Observe a video film showing how a mediator intervenes in conflict between two groups (*Observation*);
- ➔ Take part in a role play to analyze the emotions felt by people engaged in a conflict resolution (*Doing*).

3. Closing

- ➔ Share in a group discussion what they have noted during the video and the role play and list down the main steps of conflict resolution (*Dialogue with others*);
- ➔ finally each learner evaluates what they have discover during the session and decide how to implement that in their own work (*Dialogue with Self*).

By having to write their own thoughts (Dialogue with Self) before they engage in Dialogue with Others, learners can have a richer and more engaging group discussion. At its turn, the observation is again richer and more engaging when it is preceded by a collective dialogue. Then, after this dialogue, learners will have a better sense of what they need to do and what they need to learn during the following Doing. Finally if, after Doing, the learners process this experience by writing about it (Dialogue with Self) and /or discussing it with others (Dialogue with Others), this will add further insight. Such a sequence of learning activities will give the facilitator and learners the advantage of the power of interaction.

It would also have been possible to start with Doing and Observing (with half of the group observing the other half doing) and then pass to personal reflection (Dialogue with self) followed by a group discussion (Dialogue with others).

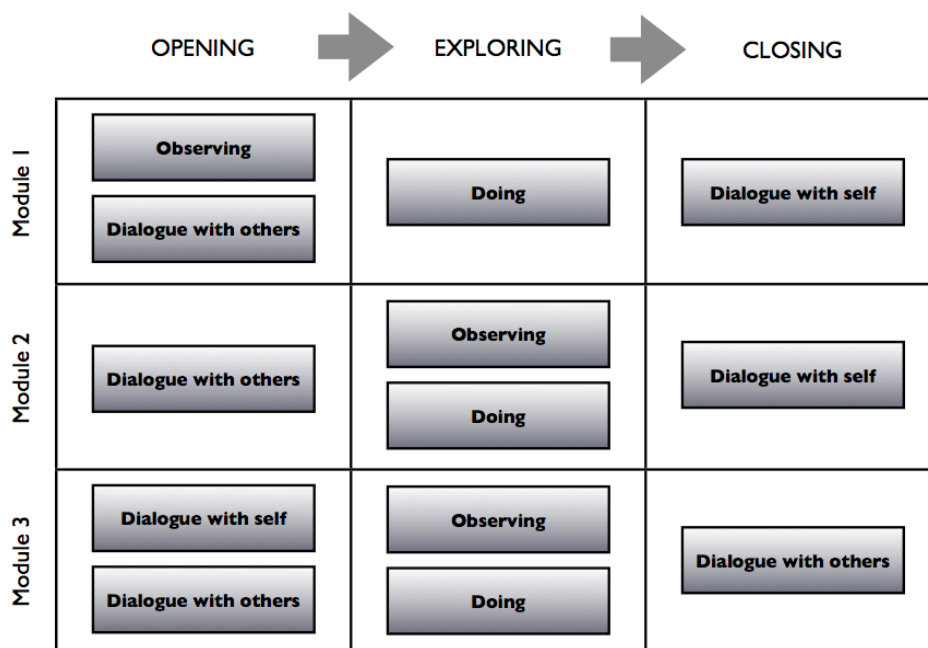
The important aspect is to create a dialectic between the two principle components of Active Learning: Experience and Dialogue.

- New experiences (whether of Doing or Observing) have the potential to give learners a new perspective on what is true (beliefs) and /or what is good (values) in the world.
- Dialogue (whether with Self or with Others) has the potential to help learners construct the many possible meanings of experience and the insights that come from them.

A flexible modular system

This approach, combined with the three stages of a learning experience (opening, exploring and closing), give you the brick to build a flexible modular system (see diagram on the following page).

The difference with the classic training approach is that the participation of learners is much more significant due to the systematic use of reflection and dialogue. During a module, the learners themselves will contribute to the topic and develop new ideas which can be used to improve the module or develop new ones. By this way, you could develop a kind of *wiki*, which by itself represents a creative and on-going process.



Three exemples of training modules using the "bricks" in a different way

Each module is a specific set of several experiences and dialogue. We can have initial training modules for beginners and advanced training modules for more experimented leaders. Each module is a specific component, which can be associated with others - like in a Lego game - in order to organize a specific training course. These modules, because they are based on experiences and dialogue, can be used as well in personal learning, coaching, face to face learning sessions as in distant or e-learning training sessions.