

Running an effective participatory interactive workshop



Teacher Education
through School-based
Support in India



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TESS-India (Teacher Education through School-based Support) aims to improve the classroom practices of elementary and secondary teachers in India through the provision of Open Educational Resources (OERs) to support teachers in developing student-centred, participatory approaches. The TESS-India OERs provide teachers with a companion to the school textbook. They offer activities for teachers to try out in their classrooms with their students, together with case studies showing how other teachers have taught the topic and linked resources to support teachers in developing their lesson plans and subject knowledge.

The TESS-India OERs are supported by a set of guidance documents for teacher educators aimed at all those tasked with educating teachers, including initial teacher training and continuing professional development. These guidance documents offer teacher educators further practical guidance on key practices to support them in their work to embed the pedagogy modelled in TESS-India OER and Indian education policy. They include ways of organising networks and facilitating teachers' meetings, guidance on running participatory workshops and developing reflective practitioners, as well as how to use action research to improve practice. Further resources will be added later. These guidance materials will be available on the website for teacher educators or other educators.

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TEGN_ Workshop

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What is a participatory interactive workshop?

A participatory interactive workshop involves you and other participants working actively towards a particular objective: to learn something that will be new for the participants. You will engage in discussion and in collaborative activities that enable you to explore a specific topic. Participating in such a workshop allows you to reflect on issues and on your own experiences. You analyse, share and enhance your knowledge.

Why is a participatory workshop suited to TESS-India?

Participatory workshops are a good model for working on change in professional practice and in particular for working with TESS-India OER.

Meetings where you are presented with data and information, or that involve only individuals talking in turn to the whole group, are often unproductive and ineffective. This is because the process of learning and developing as a professional is not simply learning pre-existing ideas but also learning how to interpret problems embedded in social practice and how to respond to these problems. This requires dialogue to make connections with other people's ideas and understandings to develop and evolve professional practice.

Participatory workshops help with this because they demand that everyone contributes to discussions and reflects on their own experiences. They help in shaping innovative ideas and developing new skills, and are supportive in nature, so they are therefore particularly suited to innovation projects such as working on changing professional practice.

The aim of the TESS-India project is to make learning in classrooms more interactive and participatory. Putnam and Borko (2000) argue strongly that teachers and teacher educators should be treated as teachers are expected to treat students. So workshops with teachers and teacher educators should aim to be participatory – working in this way enables the participants to experience first-hand the power of participatory learning and approaches for teaching and dissemination.

In participatory workshops there is a strong focus on collaboration, sharing ideas and coming up with joint solutions. Group dynamics can be carefully directed in participatory workshops so that hierarchies can be broken down. An ethos of collaboration within a whole community can be built, whatever the official status of the participants. To successfully embed and up-scale change projects, such collaboration across levels of organisations is necessary.

How participatory workshops fit in the Indian context

The NCFTE (2009) and the NCF (2005) make recommendations that are similar to characteristics of effective participatory workshops. Here are some of their recommendations:

- Learning should happen through activities, discovery and exploration in a child-friendly and child-centred manner.

- The teacher should be a facilitator of children’s learning in a manner that helps children construct knowledge and meaning.
- Teachers need to view learners as active participants in their own learning and not as mere recipients of knowledge.
- Learning is to be viewed as a search for meaning out of personal experiences; knowledge generation should be thought of as a continually evolving process of reflective learning.
- Teachers need to be trained in organising learner-centred, activity-based, participatory learning experiences – play, projects, discussion, dialogue and observation.

Case Study 1: Kamal plans a participatory workshop to explore some of the TESS-India materials

I am an educator for an educational NGO. In my job, I tend to work with lots of other organisations. As an NGO we want the learning in schools to be more participatory so that the children will become better educated. I like the TESS-India OER and I think they could really make a change.

The problem, as ever, is how to share this enthusiasm with other educators and education policy makers, including my bosses. I have been to many workshops and led a few. But I find it so easy to fall into this mode of just passing on information and talking and talking, with only a few contributions from the audience. From my own experience as a participant this can mean that I have good information of what a new resource is about, but I seldom walk away with a plan on how to use it, or a passion or even the energy to engage with the new resource. And therefore, nothing happens as a result.

So this time, I wanted it to be different: I was going to act as the facilitator of a truly interactive workshop that required the audience to actively participate, exactly as the materials suggest the students in the classrooms should experience learning. I wanted the participants to think about how these resources fitted with their own experiences and professional agendas. I also wanted the participants to have some ideas on how they could lead participatory workshops themselves.

I decided that in the workshop I wanted to focus on how to improve leadership in schools to instigate and support change – something I had been thinking about with colleagues for some time. I could use the TESS-India School Leadership OER and its accompanying video resources. I also found some of the TESS-India MOOC activities interesting for this. I used these to design the activities we were going to engage with. I must say, I spent a long time planning those activities. I tried them out and discussed them with some willing colleagues, and found that I had to reject or severely modify most of my initial plans. Sometimes the activity was really nice and interactive, but not really about my objective. At other times, making the activity interactive was the difficult part. However, I noticed I was really coming to enjoy this planning – it made me think so much. At the workshop I was very frank about my struggle with putting this workshop together with those who came: there were colleagues from my NGO, from local teacher training institutions, from the DIET and the SCERT director came as well. I felt very honoured.

The workshop largely went according to plan. I got a bit nervous at the beginning when one of the eminent participants was very eager to share her ideas, which left me with very little time to hear the views and ideas of others. I was not sure how to counteract this without being rude. So the second time I asked for ideas, I said it had to be done as a Twitter feed: only 140 characters long! That was a bit extreme and did not work too well either, but it gave me the courage to come up with some more playful limitations – I wanted to get feedback from the groups presented by a person who was wearing lace-up shoes, earrings, wearing something green ...

And no, I don't think the workshop was perfect – I still have lots to learn and ideas to try out. However, I am happy that it was not just a 'delivery' training event and it made people think about how they could use the materials, and how we could work together – I have had contact with several people since then, including about how to run participatory workshops. I think that by being open about it being the first time that I had run a workshop, and inviting suggestions and comments, I gave others the courage and inspiration to try so as well and to learn together.

The role of the facilitator

The facilitator plays an important role in the participatory workshop: they guide and support the learning, and create the ethos of collaboration and a 'safe', supportive environment. The facilitator does not need to have expert knowledge on everything that is discussed in the participatory workshop, but to run an effective workshop the facilitator would need some knowledge, some skills in facilitating ideas and, above all, the attitude and belief that effective learning involves participation of the learner in the learning process.

Case Study 2: Saby organises a participatory workshop as a non-expert facilitator

Knowing your own strengths and weaknesses is a good thing, but it can also be debilitating. I know I am pretty good at networking, enthusing people and wanting them to be part of a movement of change to improve the learning for our students. I also know that I am not that well read on suitable pedagogies. On the other hand, I do get people to talk and share their ideas.

It has also been a long time since I was last in a classroom, so I do not feel that I really know whether teachers have changed or how the politics of education is being experienced in the schools. I know quite a bit about teaching mathematics, but very little about teaching English or mother tongue. So how could I lead on a participatory workshop on developing participatory pedagogies across subjects for teachers and teacher trainers in our block?

Reflecting on the situation, I realised that workshops become participatory when they demand that everyone contributes to discussions and reflects on their own experiences. It would be really difficult to find a single person who was an expert facilitator in everything and if I built a facilitating team for this workshop each member of the team could have some different expertise to contribute. I designed a draft plan with clear objectives, and then thought about and asked around for who would be good co-facilitators. One was a colleague at my institution, another from a local educational organisation. Then, when we saw the list of participants, we also asked some of them to co-facilitate for some of the activities. We planned the workshop together and made sure that the activities were truly participatory, so that all of us – facilitators and participants – built our expertise on the objectives of the workshop.

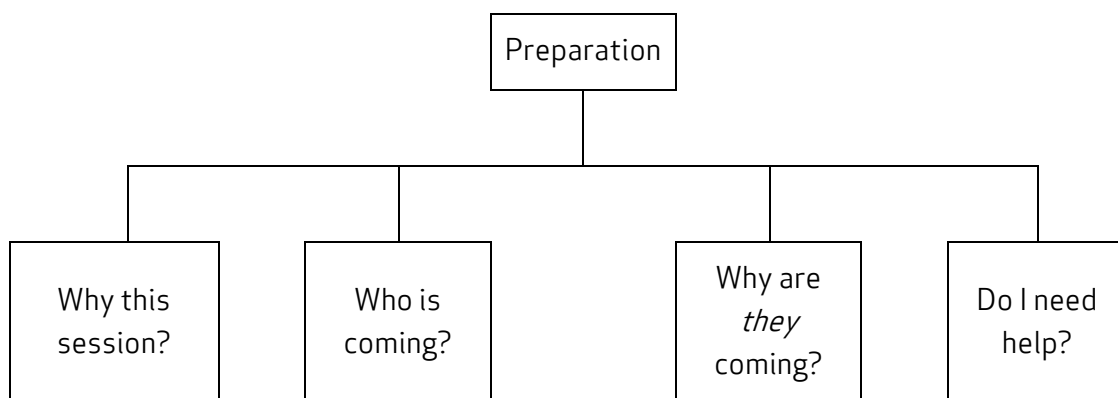
I was anxious that I might be put on the spot by questions from the participants that I would not know the answers to because of my lack of expertise. When I talked to them, my co-facilitators had the same worry! So we decided that we would ask the participants to write their questions on small cards throughout the workshop, and put these in a box. Near the end of the workshop we would have a 'question and answer' session when these questions would be read out to a 'panel of experts' consisting of the co-facilitators and some experts from the audience.

Planning for a participatory workshop

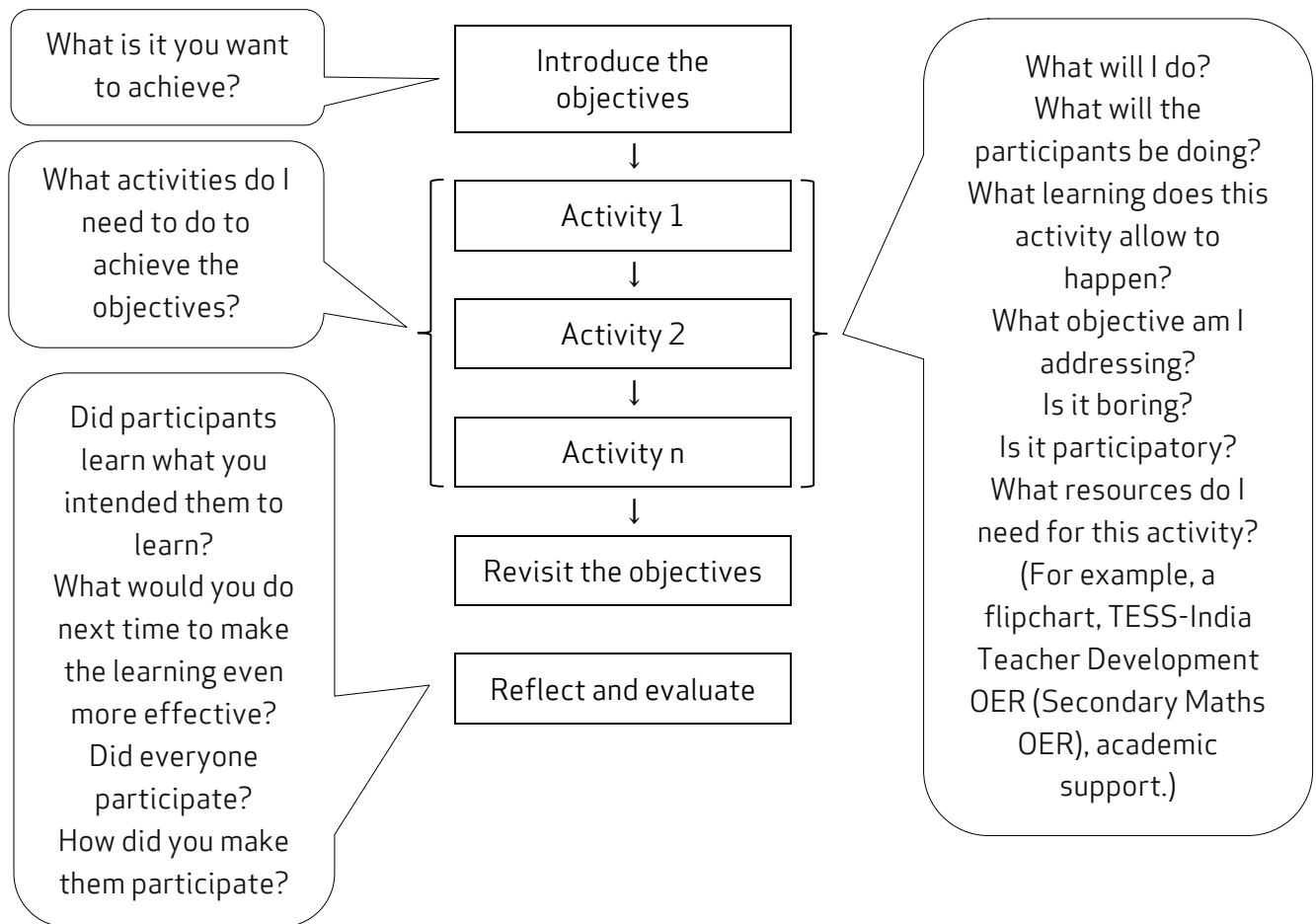
Good and careful planning is key for successful participatory workshops, as it is when planning a participatory lesson. It is crucial that you think about and define the objective of the workshop, which has to be relevant to the professional practice of the participants. Next, consider what activities you will use to help your participants achieve the objective: activities that will trigger the participants to engage in dialogue about what you want them to explore and help them to develop their understanding. If the activities you think of will not help you to achieve that objective, do not use them and think of some others that will.

When you are planning the participatory workshop you will need to do some preparation work before sending out the invites to the participants. This includes defining why you want to run this workshop, and why now. Deciding who you would like to attend is crucial: who would benefit from learning about this topic? Who should be coming? Why these people and not others? Are they really the right participants in this workshop? It is also important to decide at the preparatory stage whether you will need help, for what aspect exactly and who you might ask. Doing this ensures that planning and running the workshop is not too stressful and will be beneficial to the participants, and ensures that you fulfil your aims.

The diagram below captures this:



A useful tool for planning the workshop (or lesson) is a flowchart that depicts its 'stages'. You can put in as much detail as you like.



A template for you to use when planning a participatory workshop is provided at the end of this resource.

Case Study 3: Atul reflects on a pleasant but not very effective participatory workshop

We had a lovely workshop: lots of discussion, philosophical contemplations and ideas for change. There was great participation by those who were invited and came – they were really interested. A great vibe. But I must admit, I do not think anything will change as a result of this workshop. I had that feeling already during the workshop, but I did not want to change the atmosphere – I did not have the courage to change direction. The last question on the feedback form was ‘What will you do next week to use some of the ideas from the workshop to make a change in your professional setting?’ The most constructive comment was ‘Read up more on the TESS-India OER “Talk for learning”’. Not very promising!

So what went wrong? What could I change next time to make these workshops more effective? I think my first big mistake was not having a clear objective. The title of the workshop – ‘Learn to make your teaching more participatory with practical examples’ – sounded good from a marketing point of view but not for planning the workshop. The scope was too wide: we did look at lots of examples and lots of audio-visual resources, and read lots of activities, but there were too many and the scope was too wide. An activity designed to pin down how to actually create plans to use these examples to change practice would have definitely helped. We also did not really do the activities in the OERs – we simply read them, and said, yes, great, without critically engaging with them – we didn’t try them out ourselves and reflect

on what made them good, what we were unsure about or what each of us would like to change or keep to use in our own professional practice.

Because the objective was not defined clearly enough, I did not know how to change what we were doing when I did get that inkling that things were not going as they should, because I actually did not know what I wanted us to do! But I have made good notes of these reflective thoughts, and have noted some ideas for changes in my workshop plan while keeping the things that went well. And I will try again in two weeks' time.

An action plan for running a participatory workshop

At the end of these notes is a template to help you plan a workshop. The template includes questions based on the diagrams in the previous section. Keeping a record of your written answers, and re-reading these as you plan, can help you to develop your skills for creating and running interactive workshops over time.

Further ideas for participatory workshop techniques

The table below lists some ideas for techniques to use in participatory workshops. You can find many more by searching online for 'interactive workshop', 'participatory workshop' or 'effective workshop', or searching for particular techniques such as 'brainstorming'. Many NGOs have great ideas for this and good online information. Some useful web links are provided at the end.

Technique	Comment
Role play	This can be a good way to let participants 'experience' an approach or to let them try out some ideas in a safe environment. It can be about following a scenario – for example, on how to deal with difficult questions from your boss about the TESS-India OER and approach. It could also involve teaching a lesson from the TESS-India OER. It is important to have the scenarios prepared, for example by printing them out on card beforehand.
Sharing feedback	Thinking carefully about how ideas and feedback will be shared is important in a participatory workshop. Asking groups to report or present their findings will mean that the others are simply listening, or even not listening at all. It can also be very time-consuming. To optimise the learning that can take place, you will have to think about how you can share these ideas. Some techniques that you could use are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking only two of the groups to present their findings. Do not say in advance which groups will report – this will keep all of the groups engaged. When the two groups present their findings, the other groups then have to add their own ideas, but they are not allowed to repeat what has already been said. This will mean that all the groups have to listen actively and identify what has been said already. Asking the groups to report back in the style of a 'Twitter feed'. You decide the limitations: five sentences, one minute, 140 characters ...

Technique	Comment
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking groups to identify one issue or aspect that they want to focus on in their group feedback. At the same time you request that this feedback is done in an interactive way, involving all the other participants. At the end of the feedback, the extent of how interactive it was is discussed so that everyone get ideas about how to make a workshop interactive. Groups write their ideas on a poster that is put on the walls. Time is then given for everyone to walk around, read these posters and add their comments and thoughts, either by writing them on the posters or on Post-it notes that they stick on the posters. As the facilitator, you can then pick out the ideas that you want to refer to or discuss further.
Recording of ideas	Asking participants to record their ideas on posters and put these on the walls will help to keep the thinking process and ideas 'live' throughout the workshop. They can also take pictures of the posters to capture what has been shared. To get some variety into the posters you can ask participants to develop a picture for appropriate activities. To structure the responses you could give a 'writing frame' or a table with headings that has to be followed.
Working in different size groups	<p>Vary the size of the group, and the composition of the group, depending on the objective of the activity.</p> <p>If the activity requires participants to recount experiences in detail, or to verbalise their thinking, then working in pairs is often best, because it allows all participants to talk and listen in turn.</p> <p>Avoid making the groups too big for other activities, because then not all can be heard and not enough ideas might get shared and explored. In groups of more than six people it often gets harder to make sure that the voices of all people in the group are heard.</p> <p>Get the most out of sharing ideas and seeing different viewpoints by varying who the participants work with throughout the session. Sometimes groups or pairs can effectively be formed randomly – for example, by giving each participant a number or letter and asking all the number ones, twos, threes, etc. to sit together. At other times it is better if people from the same institution work together. In all cases think carefully about what you want to get out of the activity and create the groups accordingly.</p>
Quizzes to check understanding	True or false quizzes are a great quick way to check participants' understanding of 'the product', for example what a TESS-India OER is about. Read out some statements and ask the participants to answer with 'true' or 'false'.

Technique	Comment
Parking questions	Questions from participants can distract you from staying focused on your objectives. One technique to deal with this is to ask participants to write down their questions on a card and put it in the 'question box' so that you can deal with it later, when it fits into your planning. Alternatively you can ask participants to 'park' their questions on a big sheet on the wall and answer them later.
Brainstorming or brain-writing	<p>The aim of brainstorming is to quickly share as many ideas or opinions as possible by saying them out loud and having someone write these down. However, there are some potential downfalls with this approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • some people in the group might dominate • if you have different levels of professional hierarchy in your group, not everyone might be willing to shout out what they really think in the presence of their boss • early ideas can direct and limit what is offered later – the result of a brainstorm is often 'groupthink' instead of many original ideas. <p>To avoid this, brainstorming could be done in smaller groups first, and then shared. There is also 'brain-writing', where you ask each individual to write down their ideas (for example, on Post-it notes); these are then discussed and categorised in small groups and only then shared with the whole group.</p>

Useful links

- 'Facilitating workshops', Seed for Change: <http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/facilwsh.pdf>
- 'Creative facilitation techniques', Ministry of Human Resource Development, India: http://www.teindia.nic.in/files/teacher_trg_module/8_creative_facilitation_techniques.pdf
- 'Participatory methods', Institute of Development Studies: <http://www.participatorymethods.org/method/facilitating-workshops-co-generation-knowledge-21-tips>
- 'Tools', Training for Change: <https://www.trainingforchange.org/tools>
- 'Trainer's notebook: openings and closings', Beth's Blog: <http://www.bethkanter.org/trainers-notebook/>

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National Council of Educational Research and Training (2009) *National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE)*. New Delhi: NCERT.

Piaget, J. (1971) *Biology and Knowledge: An Essay on the Relations between Organic Regulations and Cognitive Processes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Originally published in French, 1963.)

Putnam, R.T. and Borko, H. (2000) 'What do new views of knowledge and thinking have to say about research on teacher learning?', *Educational Researcher* 29(1): 4–15.

A set of interactive workshop planning templates that can help you plan interactive and participatory workshops

