Recovery to Practice Facilitator Training
Grand Rapids, MI
Nov. 23 & 24, 2013
Summary

A two-day, 12-hour facilitator training was conducted on Saturday and Sunday, Nov. 23 & 24, 2013 at the Recovery Academy in Grand Rapids, Michigan. There were nine participants, seven of whom (78%) participated in a Recovery to Practice (RTP) pilot in a retreat format near Grand Rapids in June.

The facilitator training was conducted over the two days with six hours per day devoted to the training. The facilitators for the training were Steve Harrington and Noelle Pollet.

All participants knew each other prior to the training not just from the pilot experience but because of the close-knit nature of the peer support community in Grand Rapids. This familiarity appeared to contribute significantly to openness, cooperation, sharing of personal information/experiences, authenticity and overall enjoyment. The fact that participants volunteered (no participants were compensated for their time) to spend a total of three weekends to the RTP training indicates the dedication of participants to improve their knowledge and skills to become even more expert in their practices.

Below is a summary of participant characteristics:

Ethnicity	
White/Caucasian	6 (67%)
African-American	2 (22%)
Native American	1 (11%)
Age (years)	
30-40	2 (22%)
40-50	5 (55.6%)
50+	2 (22%)
Years as Peer Supporter	
0-1	1 (11%)
1-3	2 (22%)
3-5	0
5+	6 (67%)
Primary Work Setting	
Mental Health Service Provider Agency	4 (44.4%)
Educational (Recovery Academy staff)	4 (44.4%)
Not formally employed as Peer Supporter	1 (11%)

Training Format/Implementation

Facilitator Preparation

The day before the first session, the facilitators reviewed agendas used in three previous facilitator trainings unrelated to the RTP project but using the collaborative learning process/approach. The facilitators devised an agenda suitable for the purposes of the first day of training. An agenda was not created for the second day to allow for consideration of the first day's events and progress. This decision proved valuable as the second day almost entirely consisted of participant practice and reliance on key elements of the first day's agenda.

Because participants were to be encouraged to select their own modules for practice facilitation and activities, materials for all activities were marshaled and packed. During this process, the facilitators discovered ways in which material costs could be minimized and encourage participation and creativity by participants.

Food service was planned for both days with food and utensils paid for by a private donor.

Facilitators arrived an hour prior to the first session to unload and unpack materials, post inspirational quotes, lay out manuals and accomplish room set up.

Agenda

The agenda for the first session is below:

- Introduction/review of the RTP project
- Housekeeping
- Manual overview
- Grounding activity
- Agenda review
- Gathering activity (affirmation name)
- Group discussion—"What I liked most about the pilot."
- Group discussion—"How what I experienced during the pilot affected by peer support practice."
- Comfort agreement—led by participants
- Practice activity led by participant
- Team formation (teams of 2 or 3)
- Working Lunch (submarine sandwiches)—teams identified modules to facilitate and planned how they would do so
- Gathering activity—one word to describe how I am feeling right now
- Team 1 facilitation—two activities selected from Co-Occurring module
- Closing by volunteer participant

During the introduction, the purposes and goals of the RTP project was reviewed as well as the collaborative learning approach. Housekeeping required little time as participants were very familiar with the training site (Recovery Academy).

The manual overview also required little time as participants had previous opportunities to review the participants' manual. The materials provided to participants included (all materials were created by a private donor):

- Participant manual (~200 pages, comb binding)
- Facilitator manual (~200 pages, comb binding)
- "Preparing for Peer Classes"-3rd edition (55 pages, comb binding)
- *Open Spaces* DVD
- Pens
- Notebooks

The grounding activity for the first day was facilitated by a participant with notable art skills, which she uses extensively in her peer support work. Participants were asked to select a photo from a large number of photos and describe how that photo related to their recovery. This led to a round robin discussion.

No modifications were suggested for the agenda and participants proceeded to introduce themselves with affirmative names and gestures to be used throughout the training.

The first group discussion/brainstorm regarding what was liked most about the pilot resulted in the following responses:

- The retreat format
- Interactiveness of the curriculum
- Freedom to share
- Freedom to be vulnerable without judgment
- The knowledge and opportunity to practice and refine skills
- Food (quality food reflected respect for participants)
- The setting/environment—relaxing country setting with opportunities to boat, canoe, observe wildlife and walk
- The pace
- Socializing with new and old friends
- Quality of facilitators
- Opportunity to practice facilitating modules

The second group discussion regarding how the pilot experience affected their peer support practices brought the following responses:

- Got me back in touch with recovery principles
- I learned how to be a co-learner and express the value of others' opinions
- Helped me appreciate the many pathways to recovery
- Helped me listen better

- Helped me be more empathetic
- I now practice more appropriate peer support tasks
- Helped me get back to "real" peer support and avoid co-optation
- Gave me confidence to handle difficult topics with peers
- Let me be more comfortable with discomfort when there are tensions with peers and/or co-workers
- Helped me be a better advocate with peers
- Boosted my morale by validating what I do and its value
- Helped me understand the value of relationships and environment when it comes to communicating with peers
- I got more excited about my work because I finally went to a training that meant something (not the same-old, same-old)
- I use some of the activities with groups

Teams were rapidly formed and, during lunch, modules were identified and members met to plan facilitation. After lunch, one team facilitated a variety of activities from the co-occurring module. After facilitation, the team debriefed each module. The importance of asking the question: "What did you take away from this activity that is important to your peer support practice?" was emphasized.

A participant volunteered to facilitate a closing.

The group decided that it would be best for the remaining three teams to practice facilitation the following day so they could have more preparation time.

On the second day, a participant volunteered to perform a gathering activity. The group was asked how they felt about the previous day's session. Comments were positive, i.e. "If I didn't love it yesterday, I wouldn't have come back today." "This group is unique because we all love each other and that gives us a lot of freedom to be vulnerable, ask questions and reach out beyond our comfort zones." "We should do this kind of thing more often."

The second day was consumed almost entirely by participants practicing facilitation. This brought many opportunities for practicing vital skills such as: taking advantage of "teachable moments," managing participants who digressed, managing participants who could have monopolized discussion time, handling discomfort, avoiding and/or navigating potentially challenging emotional "triggers," time management, and using creativity and flexibility.

Observations

- It would be useful to have a table of contents and footers that identified modules in the manuals.
- Creativity and flexibility are extremely important but must be balanced with the need to address content.
- Facilitators must be comfortable with the collaborative learning approach in both theory and practice. For example, one participant said she felt she had failed because she did not facilitate an activity exactly as it was described in the facilitator manual. The group assured her that the modifications she used were both appropriate and effective.

- Depending upon personal qualities, some participants readily adopted the collaborative learning format effectively without attending the RTP pilot. One such participant is highly experienced in a strengths-based approach and facilitation and the other was readily identified as a "natural" as was demonstrated in a role play.
- Role plays could have been used more frequently.
- Debriefing is a vital skill with the collaborative learning approach that was learned quickly and practiced competently by all participants.
- A discussion about the difference between support and therapy was valuable.
- The experience level and familiarity of participants with each other and the training venue facilitated the sessions.
- The question: "What did you take away from this activity that you can use in your peer support practice?" is vital and must be emphasized in EVERY debriefing.
- Participants displayed both strengths and weaknesses but teaming practices can foster a synergy.
- It is important to participants that they have opportunities to use what they have learned and the skills developed.
- There is a need for participants to engage in a 2-3 hour session to learn how to market, contract, manage (logistics) and perform trainings, especially when travel is involved.
- Financial considerations (paying for travel/lodging/material expenses and compensation) must be addressed so they do not present a barrier to dissemination of the training.
- When training facilitators, the trainers must be aware of the relationship dynamics that often present advantages but can also present disadvantages. For example, one facilitator trainer was well-known to participants and highly regarded. Any suggestions made by him, however casual, required thoughtful communication.
- Facilitator trainers can find great value in interrupting the group by saying, "What just happened here?" to illustrate features of the collaborative learning process and help participants develop such skills as monitoring group energy and dynamics.

Conclusions

The collaborative learning approach can be exciting, healing and bonding. But careful attention must be paid to the purposes of the curriculum. This means it is vital to keep participants "on track" and paying attention to time management. Asking "What does this mean for your peer support practice?" is a grounding question and should be asked not only during debriefing but whenever there is an opportunity during activities and discussions.

Participants and facilitators must be aware of the powerful bonding that may evolve. Both must develop coping strategies for dealing with departure anxiety/grief.

Mentoring will likely play an important role in dissemination. Mentors may be drawn from the iNAPS RTP team or the endorsed facilitators, especially when they are perceived by others as especially competent and/or respected.

Dissemination may present financial barriers that must be addressed. These barriers and other issues should be addressed with a 2-3 hour session dedicated to implementation issues. One

likely effective strategy is to use an established organization, such as the Recovery Academy, to provide logistical and financial support.

Attention must be paid to what may be considered "small things." Effective listening by facilitators, quality food service and learning environment can have profound effects on both facilitators in training and participants. While ideal conditions may not be possible in all cases, maximizing effective learning environments and facilitator behaviors will be important.

Facilitators do well when they:

- Respect everyone and express it
- Acknowledge they are co-learners and express appreciation when they learn something new from participants
- Recognize transference and counter-transference (what each party "brings" to the relationship)
- Own mistakes and act to rectify them
- Know, respect and apply peer support values
- Use a strengths-based approach
- Are passionate about peer support
- Express and encourage caring for all participants
- Are secure enough with their own image/self worth to use deprecating humor appropriately to foster comfort with vulnerability
- Are non-judgmental
- Are open to new ideas and ways to do things
- Encourage a diversity of ideas
- Develop and practice group management skills
- Are aware of group energy and dynamics
- Spend a sufficient amount of time and effort to prepare
- Are willing to be flexible
- Are creative
- Respect group desires
- Pay attention to self care for themselves and participants
- Bring energy before, during and after sessions
- Are willing to mentor others
- Know and appreciate the value of the RTP curriculum