

National Education Association Unionism Training

New Business Item 45 at the 2018 NEA Representative Assembly called for a curriculum to “promote the attitudes, values, and goals of unionism, solidarity, justice, fairness and the search for the common good.” The subsequent training, designed for NEA by University of Oregon Labor Education & Research Center and The Western States Center, covers a range of topics and activities to help participants explore what these values mean for our associations and movement.

We have a few suggestions for the use of this curriculum:

- As individual icebreaker-style activities during association gatherings (meetings, retreats, etc.).
- As a longer half day or full day training experience with the modules used sequentially.

The training is designed for anyone in the NEA community, but we would particularly suggest its use for those reinforcing or moving to an organizing model, Early Career Educators, Association Representatives, with community partners, etc. We would prioritize this training for emerging leaders to connect the bread and butter work of the association with NEA’s history and values as a social movement organization. The later modules also draw connections between our values as educators, the work of the NEA as a union, and our capacity to build power and effect change.

Best Practices and Recommendations for Facilitating Challenging Trainings

Facilitating training sessions on social justice topics, and especially those concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion, can be mentally and emotionally taxing for the facilitator and the participants.

Facilitating requires more than time in the classroom. Thoughtful and thorough preparation is essential, as is de-brief and decompression afterwards. Being unprepared will put you and your learning objectives at risk. Having some strategies at hand for when people are emotionally “triggered” is strongly advised. These and other best practices can ensure that you arrive in the educational space, and orchestrate the development of the educational community, in the best possible way.

Through intentional practice, you will find methods for preparation and decompression that work best for you and feel healthy. Following the recommendations below can help you to grow as a facilitator who can sustain the learning space for the duration of the training, and do these kinds of trainings throughout your career. This list of best practices can serve as a checklist when you initially begin your facilitator journey.

Before the Training

- **Know your audience.** Anticipate and research the historical and current practices and news about the group you will be working with. You may want to send out a pre-training survey to the group. This will help you assess the level of understanding and salient questions about the training topic.
- **Prepare thoroughly** including learning objectives, a timed-out teaching plan, interactive exercises, accessible materials, etc.
- **Don't train alone** if you can avoid it. This is especially true for less experienced facilitators. We all learn from unexpected road blocks, but make sure you have support from a co-facilitator who can share the weight of the training. Design your division of labor to give each other breaks.
- **Build facilitation teams in light of the topic(s).** Particularly if you are training on racial justice, make sure the facilitation team includes people of color. Similarly, if you are training around gender justice issues, having a male and female facilitator working together is a good way to go. This can also be true for generational differences.
- **Pay attention to language justice.** If you are expecting to train in a multi-lingual environment, make sure that you have the needed interpreters and equipment.
- **Consider triggering.** Make sure that you spend some time preparing yourself mentally and emotionally for managing not only curriculum implementation, but also the thoughts and feelings of your participants.
- **Study models** for methods of communication and conflict resolution. Use the ones that work best for your training and communication style. Get input from others about how they manage conflict in trainings. Disagreement is not a bad thing, but should be managed so that the time spent on it is productive for everyone sharing the experience.
- **Create a routine** that helps you feel good going in to and coming out of the training.

During the Training

- **Establish ground rules** (or group agreements) at the beginning. Ideally, these would be generated by the group itself but have a list of the things that are important to you in mind as well. Make sure people understand that this is a serious endeavor and that part of your role as facilitator is to call out infringements of the behavioral norms and expectations the group has established. Their purpose is to ensure that the space remains as safe as possible. That doesn't mean everyone will feel comfortable all of the time.
- **Explanation about pronouns:**

- We use pronouns to talk about other people. Typically, we use she/her/hers for people we assume are female, and he/his/his for people we assume are male. Today, we are learning not to assume that someone's outward appearance (or the way we perceive that appearance) determines how that person identifies themselves. This is why we now ask people to state their preferred pronouns when they introduce themselves.
- Understanding that gender is a social construct, we seek to affirm an individual's chosen identity by creating space for that truth to be spoken. Preferred pronouns should be used whether the individual is present or not. Affirming pronouns is a way to show respect, increase visibility for those with a non-binary or otherwise non-traditional sex/gender identity, convey solidarity, and honor an important cultural shift in use of language that is non-oppressive.
- **Be prepared to adjust the timing** in your teaching plan. You will know by "reading the room" when it is appropriate to spend more time on particular aspects of the training, but check in with the group for their consent to stay on the topic or to move on. You have the option of coming back to a topic at the conclusion of your training, either in wrap-up, one-on-one follow-ups, or collectively if participants want to stay longer and if the space is available.
- **Keep the learning objectives in mind!** Interesting and unexpected divergences can have value, but don't let your plan get totally de-railed.
- **Manage triggering as it occurs.** Triggering may show up as anger or withdrawal, dominating the dialogue or being silenced, tears or defensive body language. If you believe someone is being triggered, don't ignore it. Use classroom conflict techniques to manage interactions. Sometimes taking a break and speaking to someone privately is appropriate. Make sure everyone understands that the impact of particular information or discussion isn't the same for everyone. Members of traditionally marginalized groups may have strong (and legitimate) reactions that should not be ignored. They also should not dominate the learning process for the entire group. This can be a tricky balance to achieve.
- **Provide evaluation opportunity** for participants.

After the Training

- **Do self-reflection** on your own personal evaluation, and de-brief with your co-facilitator as soon as possible after the class. Compare your self-evaluation to the feedback from participants' evaluations. The opinions of your participants are important, but so is your own critical self-evaluation. Experiences of triggering, or the reactions of others to triggering can also show up in evaluations.
- **Become a part of collectives** for trainers, educators, or facilitators on diversity, equity, and inclusions so that you have a place to process with peers who do what you do. This is useful for learning tips, best practices, other forms of curriculum, and group dynamics.