

## **PREPARING FOR WORKSHOP**

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To be an effective group facilitator, peer leaders must feel comfortable with both the subject material and the methods and activities that will enable all students in the workshop group to master the concepts. This article addresses steps a new leader should take to prepare for the first workshop, when the individual students get to know each other, and for weekly meetings when students are working as a team.

### **1. Knowing the Basics**

There are many fundamental guidelines that are needed to be in place for a workshop group to become successful. These are simple elements to be taken into account when preparing for the weekly workshop that are often overlooked by workshop leaders. (*Note: Some PLTL Workshop programs may also have a “Coordinator” level and role, arranging schedules for new and returning workshop leaders. Some of the comments that follow assume some type of coordination between the individual leader and the PLTL program, including involvement with administrative tasks, faculty, and leader training.*)

### **2. Preparing for the first workshop of the semester**

*Make sure that you know the workshop schedule:* Know the date of the first workshop, your workshop’s assigned day and time, and which unit will be covered for your first workshop.

*Know the time commitment involved in workshop leading:* Talk to the professor or experienced leaders to determine how much time is required to prepare and run a successful workshop. Make sure to manage your schedule so that you have enough time to adequately prepare for your workshop sessions.

*Know where your workshop is:* Before your first workshop, make sure that you know what building and room your workshop will be held in. Check out the room ahead of time. Are there desks or tables? Are they movable? Are there chalkboards or dry erase boards? Do you need to bring your own supplies?

*Know what material you will be using:* There are several different workshop manuals available. Make sure that you are familiar with the materials that you will be using in your workshop. Obtain the manual or workshop units ahead of time to get a feel for the structure. It is also helpful to have at your disposal a copy of the textbook that is required for the course.

*Know how the workshop is graded and integrated with the lecture:* Different schools and professors have different grading styles and course integration. Talk to the professor(s) about grading and attend a lecture if possible. This way you will have an idea of where

your students are coming from. Also talk to the professor(s) about how the workshop problems will be integrated with tests, for example. Make sure you know how you will be grading your workshop students, what percentage of their grade the workshop entails, and how their workshop grade is broken down, if applicable.

### **3. Examples of workshop grading styles**

At Coastal Carolina University, the workshop can be taken for either 0-20% of the grade as designated by each student. Each workshop is worth 30 points: 15 for attendance, five for preparation, five for participation, and five for cooperation. At Miami University (OH), the workshops end up counting as a test grade. Each workshop is worth four points. This is based mostly on the completion of students' self-tests. However, workshop leaders can use their discretion to account for lack of participation. At the City College of New York, each professor has a different way of integrating his workshops. Some professors factor the workshops as a range of +/- 5 points of the student's grade. Others count workshops as 10% of the students' final grade. There are three components: the self-test, participation, and the quiz.

### **4. Knowing your students**

One of the most important components of the workshop is setting up a comfortable learning atmosphere for your workshop students. In order to do this, you must make a great effort to get to know your students and allow them to get to know one another. This needs to be started from the very first workshop.

*Know their names:* Obtain a list of students who will be in your workshop group prior to the first day. Read over the list several times to familiarize yourself with their names. This will help you to learn their names more quickly when you actually meet them.

*Know how many students will be involved in your workshop:* The number of students within each workshop can vary greatly. The optimal number ranges from six to eight students, but your situation may depend on local conditions. The number of students will determine how you will run your workshop and what techniques you will use. (For more, see *Twenty Workshop Techniques*.) Make sure your room assignment is adequate for your group size.

*Know what information you will want to collect from your students:* It is very important to be able to contact your workshop students in case there is a change in the workshop schedule. Information such as e-mail addresses, phone numbers, or address/dorm room should be obtained on the first day. Generating this list of information not only helps you, but also helps your students to establish a support system. It is up to you and your students what information will be exchanged.

*Icebreakers/Team builder:* Icebreakers and team builders are very important; they help

you not only learn your students' names, but also foster a sense of community. This sets up an atmosphere in which your students feel comfortable enough around each other in order to ask questions, participate, make mistakes, and learn together without feeling intimidated.

## **5. Examples of effective ice breakers/team builders**

*Name games:* Have each student say their name, major and two interesting facts about themselves.

*Adjective game:* Each student has to choose an adjective that describes her/him and starts with the first letter of their first name. If you feel comfortable enough, you can have each student act out their adjective.

*Pairing:* Pair students up and each person must interview the other and present each other to the group.

*Blanket game:* The group is split into two teams. A blanket is held up between them, so that neither team can be seen by their opponent. Each team chooses one person to sit down in front of the blanket. The blanket is then dropped and that person must say the name of the person who is on the other side. Whoever can get the right name first wins. The loser then must move over to the other team. The team that collects everyone wins.

*Two truths and a lie:* Each person writes down two truths about themselves and one lie. They then read their entries out loud and the group must figure out which one is the lie: The crazier, the better.

*Famous person pairing:* Each person gets a name tag with a famous person on it placed on their back so that they can not see it. They then must walk around and ask other people questions about who they are. They can only ask "yes" or "no" questions. Once you have figured out who you are, you then must find someone who would be your partner or pair. For example: Batman and Robin. This can also be done with scientific or mathematical concepts or concepts from other disciplines.

*M&M game:* Have each student take some M&M's when they walk into workshop. Tell them not to eat the M&M's. For each M&M that is taken the student must tell one fact about themselves. You can make it so that each color represents something different they have to tell about themselves. For example, tell their hometown and an interesting fact about their hometown. The same game can be done with toilet paper. Tell each student to take some toilet paper squares. Then for each square they have, they have to tell an interesting fact about themselves.

Another idea is to bring treats to your first workshop such as cookies or candy. But watch out not to give students too much sugar: it may not allow them to concentrate on the workshop itself.

## 6. Knowing the expectations

Workshops have very specific goals or expectations that should be established and communicated to the workshop leader prior to the first workshop by the local PLTL program. First, your professors are more than likely going to set a goal for the workshop leaders themselves. This can involve the following:

*Expectations from the professor:* Professors should set up a good communication system with the workshop leaders from the very beginning of the semester. The workshop leaders need to understand what the professor is expecting the students will get out of the workshop and what they are expecting from the leaders. This could involve how much time and effort will be put into the workshop.

*Expectations for yourself:* Before going into your first workshop, it is very important that you set goals or expectations for yourself. This helps the you, the workshop leader, know what needs to be done and what doesn't. This involves what you want to get out of the workshop environment and from your students. As Dan Parker, from the State University of West Georgia said, "...To lead the best damn workshop I can."

*Expectations for your group:* Workshop leaders need to come up with what they will expect from their workshop students themselves. This needs to be established and conveyed to the students on the first workshop of the semester. If your students know what you are expecting of them, then there can be no cause for controversy or questioning over grades. If they did not meet the expectations of the workshop leader, then their grades should be affected.

## 7. Preparing for the weekly workshop

There needs to be some level of preparation before each workshop that you facilitate. No matter how many times you have led a workshop, each group and each week you may encounter a new situation or problem. If you are prepared, then you may be able to identify potential problems ahead of time. These problems can then be addressed before the students get too frustrated. There are many different approaches for preparation.

*Have a weekly meeting to go over workshop material with the faculty and/or experienced leaders.* Weekly meetings are a great tool to help workshop leaders. On some campuses the professor leads the meeting, modeling questions and problem-solving styles. On other campuses, a coordinator (or experienced leader) may lead the meeting, also providing appropriate modeling. The weekly meetings are a very effective strategy, providing just in time problem-solving reviews and suggested approaches.

Weekly meetings are effective because the workshop leaders have a chance to work out the problems in a group, just as their workshop students will. They also have a support structure in place with the other workshop leaders as they determine how best to solve a problem. Since there are often many ways to solve each problem, the meeting allows each

workshop leader to see how the other leaders present or work through problems. As a result, each workshop leader better understands, and knows to anticipate, some of the different issues and problem-solving techniques that may arise. This may also allow you to determine where your students may make mistakes. If you can anticipate where the problems areas will be, the more effective you can become as a workshop leader.

In addition, these meetings allow the workshop leaders to determine if there are any problems from the materials that will be omitted in the weekly workshop. Some of the problems may not be pertinent to the current lecture or class, and therefore can be omitted.

*Meet with the professor to go over workshop materials.* Weekly group meetings may not be applicable or available at certain institutions. Therefore, a meeting each week with the individual professor may be necessary. The same benefits as weekly meetings can come from this. The workshop leader will be able to go over the workshop with someone who has a better grasp of the material than the leader might. The faculty member can also share key points that she or he wants students to grasp from each problem. This may contribute to a better understanding of the workshop material.

*Attend a lecture.* Sitting in on the lecture prior to an exam may be beneficial to the workshop leader. This allows the workshop leader to “freshen up” on the current material. If the workshop leader knows how the professor is teaching the class, then perhaps the leader can adjust slightly to supplement the lecture.

*Go over the workshop problems.* If meetings with other leaders and the professor are not possible, then you will need to go over the workshop material yourself. Always remember though, that if you are stumped on a certain problem there are always other leaders or your professor to ask for help.

*Stacia Weaver, Coastal Carolina University, echinacea79@hotmail.com*  
*Cathy Hargis, Miami University of Ohio cathyhargis@hotmail.com*  
*Elina Yusufov, City College of New York Elina\_yusufova@hotmail.com*