Inventory of Activity Types for Working with Groups
(contributed by Rod Bolitho)

This list contains descriptions of a number of different activity types and formats which are useful for various purposes and at various stages in working with groups. Some activities are described in terms of their purpose *whereas others will be recognisable as generic* types. *Many of the standard training and teaching resource books contain examples of the activities listed here.*

A. Activities relating to group climate and the interpersonal dimensions of group life

Activities in this section are strongly oriented towards process rather than content and they may be novel to those participants who see the value of a course in terms of the knowledge and information it offers. In this sense, they should all properly be seen as means to an end.

- Icebreakers **Activities useful at the start of a group's life to help people to get to know each other and feel at ease in the group. They may also contribute to building trust. Icebreakers can have a personal or a professional focus but should not require participants to take risks or to disclose anything from their private domain if they don't wish to.**

- Warmers **Activities that can be used at the start of a session to get a group interested in or focussed on a topic or on being together as a group. They are particularly useful when a group has not been together for a while or when they come together from different spheres of activity or from a preceding session on another topic.**

- Establishing Ground Rules **Even in the most ostensibly mature adult group, there is potential for tension and conflict, as pet ideas and differing world views are put up for scrutiny. For these and other reasons, time spent on negotiating a set of agreed ground rules almost always pays off. Ground rules can cover formal issues like punctuality or keeping deadlines and agreements, but may also include a commitment to listening, proper turn-taking etc. A 'pyramid' discussion is a commonly used mechanism for this type of activity: starting with individual ideas which are then pooled in groups of four and finally negotiated in a whole group session. The rules, once agreed, can be displayed on a poster and can remain there for the entire duration of the group's life. This activity, properly handled, also contributes to trust-building in a group.**

- Energisers **These are usually short, snappy activities which are most useful in mid-session when energy and motivation levels may be flagging and perhaps when participants have been sitting and concentrating for too long. For that reason, energisers often involve doing something physical.**

B. Activities for opening up and drawing on
participants' existing ideas and experience

In order to facilitate a group successfully, a trainer needs to know what ideas and beliefs exist among participants. The activity types described in this section are aimed at this process of opening up and making past experience available as a group resource.

- Analysing needs   **Advance questionnaires about needs often fail to reveal anything useful or may require further elaboration. It is usually helpful to give participants a chance to state their own needs and expectations at the start of a course. This can be done orally, with the facilitator recording needs in a public way, or more effectively in writing, following an instruction such as** *'Note down the three things you would most like to cover in this course, then get into groups of four and come up with a shared list of three.'* **These group lists can then be shared and consolidated to help establish an agenda for the whole group. This allows for every voice to be heard but also acknowledges the need for compromise over needs and expectations in a group setting.**

- Brainstorming   **This is an activity type which draws on all the ideas and experience available in a group as a whole. The facilitator may ask for ideas on a topic and will then take contributions as they are called out at random by group members. The starting point may be verbal, an image or even a call for metaphors representing a particular issue or topic. All ideas are valued at this stage and the facilitator will acknowledge them and record them e.g. on a mind map or in a list on a board or flipchart. This type of activity is particularly valuable as a means of 'opening up' a topic, of identifying areas of concern/interest/past experience or of diagnosing needs.**

- Stories   **Teachers' stories are usually told in the privacy of a staffroom or a sitting room at home. Yet they are a rich source of experience and, if shared, may form a valuable basis for professional learning. They can refer to classroom incidents or to any other aspect of professional life, and they can be told in small groups, in plenary if trust has been established, or written down as 'data' for thinking, questioning or analysis. Many teacher participants have reported that the act of telling, of articulating a story has been an essential first step towards understanding an incident more fully.**

- Autobiographical activities   **This kind of activity, as is the case with stories, may help a teacher to stand back from her/his routine and think more openly about professional development. It is often useful for professionals to have an opportunity to retrospect on stages in their career and to share them with a colleague or colleagues in a secure environment. This type of activity may begin with an instruction such as** *'Think back over your career and identify two or three significant turning points'* **and it may typically involve visualisation (***'What is the strongest image in your mind from that stage in your career?'***) and even visual representation** *(Draw images to represent the turning points you have identified')*. **Activities like these are particularly suited to the intimacy and privacy of individual and pair work. They will wake things up in the minds of participants and there may be no need to share them publicly.**

C. Activities for working with ideas

Ideas generated in a group, e.g. through a brainstorming session are in many ways the most valuable resource a trainer/facilitator has to work with. Brainstorming will put ideas up for scrutiny, but the process seldom ends there. The activity types described here are all designed to probe a bit more deeply and to encourage critical thinking. They are often useful in mid-session, as a group 'gets its teeth into' a topic and curiosity and motivation levels are high. Most of them are suited to small group work and to the production of an end-product such as a poster, a written or oral report or an OHP presentation.

- Sorting/categorising/grouping   **In this type of activity, participants are asked to 'create order' by putting ideas into categories or groups. Typically, they encourage further exploration of ideas and often also lead to a clearing up of misunderstandings.**

- Prioritising   **An activity type which leads to agreement on the relative importance of ideas. Some are accepted as important while others will be rejected or given lower priority. A typical instruction might be *'Agree on the five issues that concern you most in your work'*. Very useful as a means of deciding what to focus on when time is limited.**

- Questioning   **In this type of activity, participants prepare questions on a topic (or perhaps on a professional article) to ask their peers or to discuss in plenary. In order to ask good questions about a topic, we need to think quite deeply about it, and the questions will in turn provoke new thinking in those responding to them. Questioning is a key skill for teachers and trainers and yet often little attention is paid to it in pre-service and INSETT programmes. Participants may need time and several practice opportunities before they are able to ask good questions consistently.**

- Analysing   **Going into an idea more deeply usually means breaking it down into its parts. This type of activity may start with questions like *'What are the main elements of reflective practice? How can we break it down?'* This process of analysis is often a useful way of getting to the real meaning of an idea which is being bandied about at a superficial level or which needs to be more thoroughly understood before working with it further.**

- Synthesising   **In one sense, this is the opposite of *analysing*. This type of activity calls for an ability to pull threads together, to identify common ground between ideas and concepts, and to use the parts to construct a whole. It is often used as a way of organising ideas more efficiently and of detecting and dealing with overlapping ideas. It may also be useful towards the end of a session when it is often important to work back from detail towards a bigger picture.**

D. Shared talk

Every group is likely to need 'plenary' time with the facilitator, usually when ideas are ready to 'go public' and to be subjected to wider scrutiny. Talk is the vehicle for this and it may be more or less structured in nature. The activity types which follow are 'whole group' activities, most often requiring careful forethought and facilitation.

- Discussion **may be more or less structured in nature. It is an opportunity for everyone in a group to 'take the temperature' and to intervene with a personal contribution to the**

development of ideas and professional learning. Free-flowing discussion in the context of professional learning requires careful facilitation to ensure that voices are heard and ideas understood, that everyone's contribution is valued, and that points are properly captured and summarised where appropriate.

- Debate **Professional opinion, especially on emotive issues such as classroom discipline or the correction of error, is often divided. A debate is a classical, structured format which allows for these differences to be aired and explored, and for talking time to be shared according to predetermined rules. Debates imitate procedure in a democratic parliament and they require an impartial chair to ensure that the rules are adhered to. It is sometimes useful to ask participants to speak in favour of something which they are actually opposed to. By doing this, they are likely to get to understand the other point of view more thoroughly, which is usually far more instructive than digging themselves more deeply into their own 'trench'.**

- Rounds **A round is an activity in which all the members of a group, including the trainer or facilitator, sit or stand in a circle and each one is invited to make a short statement on a given issue. The opening instruction may be something like *'What is on your mind at the end of the first day? No long speeches, just a ten-second statement on whatever is uppermost in your mind. Put up a finger when you're ready to speak.'* It is important to give individuals the right to remain silent if they don't wish to contribute. Rounds are a good way of taking the temperature by giving everyone an opportunity to say something. A closed circle, which many facilitators also like to use for discussions, is a powerful, non-hierarchical arrangement which emphasise that everyone in the group has an equal right to be seen and heard.**

E. Activities suitable towards the end of a course or a group's life

All too often, courses just 'fizzle out' as participants' levels of energy, enthusiasm and motivation begin to drop away and their thoughts turn to the routine matters that face them on their return to familiar home and workplace surroundings. This can often be a difficult time for a trainer-facilitator, and the following activity types may be useful to turn to then.

- Action Planning **Most professional development courses are intended to make a difference to participants' lives and work. All too often however, the impact of events like these dissipates soon after the course as reality kicks in. An action planning activity which allows participants to contemplate this return to reality and to set themselves realistic goals, often helps, particularly if there is agreed follow-up six months later, perhaps by e-mail, by the facilitator and the participants themselves.**

- Group disbanding **Just as it is important to give attention to group formation through ice-breaking and trust-building, it is usually helpful to participants in a group that has worked closely together to have an opportunity to mark the end of a group's life. It can be an emotional moment, especially on residential courses, where participants frequently become very close. There are many possible formats for disbanding activities, but a *round*, as described above, may be a suitable way of achieving this kind of closure, using a starter like *'I'm grateful to my colleagues for ....'***