

Meaningful Participation and Meeting Facilitation

Meaningful participation is closely related to meeting facilitation—whether or not your staff and volunteers can participate in your organization’s work depends in large part on how you facilitate meetings.

“Meetings” not only refer to monthly meetings within an organization or special meetings with people outside of your organization. Meetings also include various other situations, such as meetings for organizational strategic planning, meetings to draft internal policy, and so on.

In your experience of attending or organizing a meeting, have you seen meeting participants as passive receptacles of knowledge or do you engage your staff and volunteers as active participants and learners? Take a few minutes to compare the pictures below. What words would you use to describe each way of teaching?

Teaching Method One



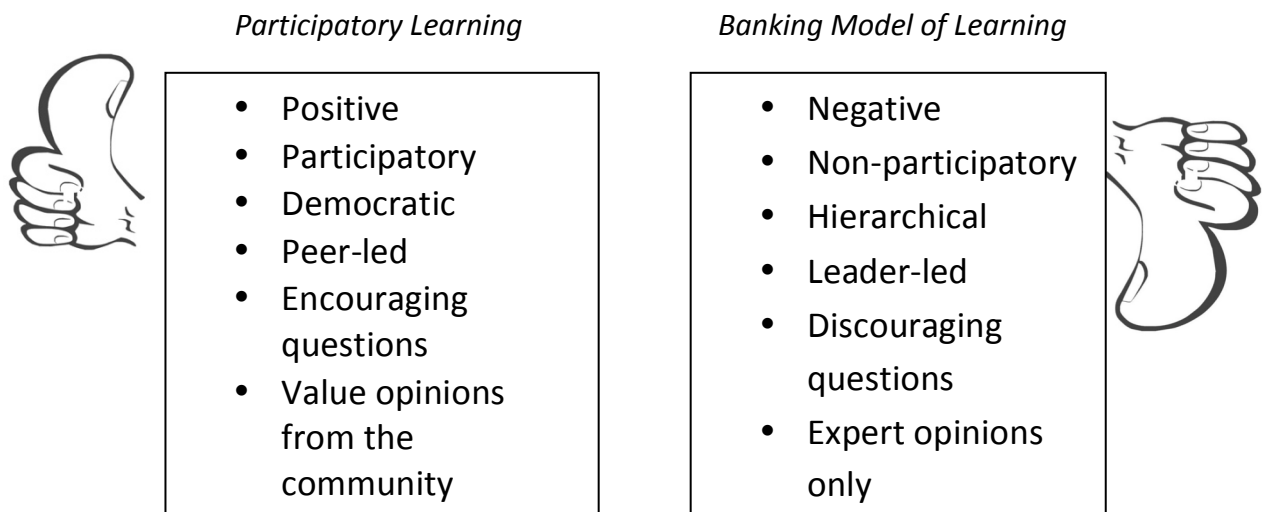
Teaching Method Two



The picture on the left describes a typical “banking model” of education. Participants do not accept knowledge voluntarily; rather, the teacher instills it in them, like filling a jar with coins. The picture on the right, on the other hand, describes a scene of participatory learning, where all participations are engaged in discussions and study in an equal manner.

As a facilitator, your role in these two methods of teaching is sharply contrasting and different. In the banking model, you dictate decisions to participants and issue directions. In participatory learning, you engage participants in discussion and actively solicit their participation and input.

We can use the following words to describe the two methods.



The idea of participatory learning may differ from the education style to which you are accustomed. Many schools are based around the idea that students are receptacles and teachers must merely fill them with knowledge. In this way, meetings are no different from classes – where the facilitator simply lectures and attempts to deposit knowledge into a passive participant; the meeting is generally neither productive nor interesting. Instead, good meeting facilitation should encourage the active participation and inclusion of everyone present. Producing social change and running a successful NGO require a different idea of learning

and participation – to be successful, they require inclusive, participatory, and active learning.

Role-play: “Hand in your phones.”

When mentoring a group to learn the importance of meaningful participation, this role-play can help participants experience the idea and understand its importance.

Steps:

1. When all participants return from their break, the facilitator will announce that they must hand in their mobile phones. We have found many participants check their phones throughout the sessions before the break, and this has an effect on the results of the learning process. So as not to affect the lessons, we have decided that everyone must temporarily hand in their cellphones. Everyone can retrieve their cellphones during the tea break.
2. After collecting everyone’s mobile phone, the facilitator explains this session is a role-play, and that we are looking forward to hearing participants’ feelings and opinions on the subject.
3. Invite the participants to share if they had similar experiences while making decisions in their organizations.