

Co-Creating a Facilitation Training Curriculum: A Formative Evaluation



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Overview

High quality facilitators are necessary for the success of group-based educational and prevention programs for youth. Facilitators affect how students engage with and absorb a program’s content, which in turn affects what students learn from the program. Research indicates that effective group facilitators understand the needs of participants, meet them where they are, and address their needs in the teaching environment, such as through participant-centered facilitation.

This study sought to identify strategies to support high quality facilitation in healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs for youth. To conduct the study, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funded Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, to develop and conduct a formative evaluation of a facilitation skills training curriculum for HMRE program staff. Working in collaboration with program staff from two community-based organizations—Catholic Charities of Wayne County in New York and Youth and Family Services in South Dakota—members of the study team sought to identify the facilitation needs and challenges of HMRE programs for youth and then iteratively develop and refine a facilitation skills training curriculum that addressed these needs and challenges.

Research questions

1. What are the most pressing facilitation needs and challenges for HMRE programs for youth?
2. For the facilitation skills training curriculum developed through this evaluation:
 - a. What aspects of the training content, format, and associated tools did facilitators and supervisors think worked well? What did they find challenging to use or implement?
 - b. What improvements did facilitators and supervisors suggest for the training content, methods, and materials for future replication?
 - c. Did the use of these facilitation strategies affect youth engagement?
3. What lessons were learned from using the formative evaluation process for testing and improving facilitation training for HMRE programs?

Purpose

This report describes the design of the formative evaluation, as well as the process the study team used for identifying the facilitation training needs and developing the training curriculum. The report also describes the process of implementing and refining each training topic, and key findings and lessons learned through the process of using a formative evaluation to improve programming. Mathematica and Public Strategies conducted the evaluation as part of the broader Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation for ACF.

What we learned

- Facilitation skills training is limited or nonexistent among most providers of HMRE programming for youth.
- Staff from the two programs in this study felt that facilitators could especially benefit from training in (1) how to manage and reset energy in the classroom, (2) how to deepen learning through debriefing, and (3) how to build trust and safety while challenging students’ comfort zones.

- Staff from both programs found value in the trainings delivered by the study team and provided useful feedback for improvements.
- Facilitators said that after completing the trainings, they felt better prepared to deepen connections with their students, manage and reset energy in the classroom, and work towards building an environment of trust for youth.
- Facilitators indicated that intentional planning and integrating concrete strategies and tools helped them feel more confident in the classroom and increased their engagement with youth.

Methods

The study team used a formative evaluation design guided by the Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²) framework. The design involved identifying HMRE practitioners to participate in the evaluation, conducting an in-depth assessment of their programs, and collaborating with them to develop and test the new training curriculum. The team collected data through interviews with program facilitators and supervisors, observations of program facilitators, debriefing discussions with program staff, and surveys of youth program participants.

Implications for youth programs and research

The study resulted in a new, research-based training curriculum on facilitation skills for organizations that provide HMRE and similar types of group-based educational and prevention programs for youth. The curriculum includes three modules along with a trainer's guide and associated tools and materials. The curriculum is designed for use by program staff such as supervisors and facilitators who are looking to enhance facilitation quality and improve engagement in youth programming. Future research could examine the impacts of the curriculum on facilitation quality, levels of engagement with programming, and youth outcomes.

The study also showed how a formative evaluation design can serve as the basis for efforts to improve programs and develop a curriculum. The study had the specific purpose of developing a facilitation training curriculum for HMRE program facilitators. However, the study methods could apply equally well to a range of programs and in any number of settings. Key elements to success were (1) a strong partnership based on early trust-building and knowledge-sharing activities, (2) the research and substantive expertise that went into developing and implementing the facilitation training curriculum, (3) an expert trainer to guide and support the development process, and (4) an evidence-informed and well-defined yet flexible formative evaluation framework.

I. Introduction

High quality facilitators are necessary for the success of group-based educational and prevention programs for youth. Facilitators affect how students engage with and absorb a program’s content (Friend et al. 2020), which in turn affects what students learn from the program. Research on effective teachers shows that students who are more engaged in the classroom graduate from high school at higher rates, outperform their peers in grades and on standardized exams, and better internalize the content they have learned (Fredricks et al. 2011; Dyer 2013; Skinner 1990; Finn and Rock 1997). The same principles apply to group facilitation more broadly. Research indicates that effective group facilitators understand the needs of participants, meet them where they are, and address their needs in the teaching environment, such as through participant-centered facilitation (Schoel et al. 1988; Wilkinson 2012; Powell and Cassidy 2007).

This study sought to identify strategies to support high quality facilitation in healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs for youth. These programs, which have become a growing focus of federal policy and research (Box I.1), educate youth on romantic and interpersonal relationships through a structured, classroom-based curriculum (Scott and Huz 2020). Although facilitators of HMRE programs for youth typically receive some program-specific training, it usually focuses more on the content of the curriculum than on the facilitation skills needed to promote student engagement (Scott et al. 2017). The lack of intentional training on high quality facilitation might leave some HMRE facilitators only partially prepared to deliver the program effectively.

To support high quality facilitation in HMRE programs for youth, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funded Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, to develop and conduct a formative evaluation of a facilitation skills training curriculum for HMRE program staff. Our end goal was to develop a new, research-based training curriculum on facilitation skills for organizations that provide HMRE and similar types of group-based educational and prevention programs for youth. To ground the training in evidence, Mathematica and Public Strategies developed and refined the curriculum as part of a formative evaluation conducted with two community-based organizations: (1) Catholic Charities of Wayne County in New York¹ and (2) Youth and Family Services

Box I.1. About HMRE youth programs

The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides grant funding for HMRE programming to improve the well-being and long-term success of children and families. HMRE programs provide comprehensive services, including services to improve relationship skills and support positive socioemotional and identity development during adolescence and into adulthood. Organizations that deliver HMRE programs to youth generally offer them in a variety of settings, including high schools and community settings, and use a structured, classroom-based curriculum. Common curricula consist of 10 to 20 one-hour lessons and involve a mix of teacher-led instruction and interactive small-group discussion, role-playing, or skill-building activities (Scott et al. 2017). When delivered in school, HMRE programs for youth are commonly integrated into an existing class, such as health or family and consumer sciences. After-school or community-based programs often aim to reach specific high-risk populations, such as teen parents or youth who did not finish high school.▲

¹ Due to a recent merger, Catholic Charities of Wayne County is now called Catholic Charities Finger Lakes.

in South Dakota. Mathematica and Public Strategies conducted the evaluation as part of the broader Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation for ACF (Box I.2).

Box I.2. About the STREAMS evaluation

In 2015, ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) with funding from ACF's OFA contracted with Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, to conduct the STREAMS evaluation to identify strategies for improving the delivery and effectiveness of HMRE programs. The evaluation has a particular emphasis on understudied populations and program approaches not covered in ACF's prior federal evaluations. STREAMS includes: (1) an in-depth process study, (2) random assignment impact studies, (3) a rapid-cycle evaluation of text message reminders to improve attendance at HMRE workshops, (4) a formative evaluation of a facilitation skills training curriculum for HMRE programs for youth, and (5) predictive analytic modeling of attendance at HMRE workshops. Learn more about the evaluation at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/strengthening-relationship-education-and-marriage-services-streams>.▲

The evaluation team took an iterative approach to curriculum design and implementation based on the following key research questions:

- What are the most pressing facilitation needs and challenges for HMRE programs for youth?
- For the facilitation skills training curriculum that we developed:
 - What aspects of the training content, format, and associated tools did facilitators and supervisors think worked well? What did they find challenging to use or implement?
 - What improvements did facilitators and supervisors suggest for the training content, methods, and materials for future replication?
 - Did the use of these facilitation strategies affect youth engagement?
- What lessons were learned from using the formative evaluation process for testing and improving facilitation training for HMRE programs?

This report describes how the evaluation team addressed these research questions by working with two youth-serving HMRE programs to design and pilot the facilitation skills training curriculum. In describing this process, we share lessons about improving facilitation quality in the specific context of HMRE programs. We also provide more general lessons on using a formative evaluation to improve program quality through an intensive and collaborative effort.

The report is organized as follows: In Chapter II, we describe the design of the formative evaluation, the methods we used for the evaluation, characteristics of the two participating sites, and the main data sources. In Chapter III, we present the process for identifying the facilitation training needs and developing the training curriculum in collaboration with our partners. In Chapter IV, we describe the process of implementing and refining each training topic, the improvements we made to the curriculum based on the formative evaluation, staff perceptions of the training and other feedback, and changes they noticed in youth engagement. In Chapter V, we summarize our key findings and lessons learned through the process of using formative evaluation design to improve programming.

II. Design of the Formative Evaluation

The evaluation team used a formative design to develop the facilitation skills training curriculum. In a formative evaluation, researchers collaborate with practitioners to develop and test a new strategy or solution for improving an existing program or practice. They base their collaboration on an in-depth assessment and understanding of existing program design and implementation, as well as data collected from the program to make improvements. Both the collaborative nature of the evaluation design and its grounding in existing practice seek to increase the chances that the new strategy or solution will have long-term success. In the present evaluation, using a formative evaluation meant identifying HMRE practitioners to participate in the evaluation, conducting an in-depth assessment of their programs, and collaborating with them to develop and test the new training curriculum.

A. Participating sites for the formative evaluation

To identify partners for this formative evaluation, we selected from among 45 organizations that had received grants in 2015 from ACF’s OFA to provide school- or community-based HMRE programs (Avellar et al. 2020). From among these organizations, we identified sites that met the following criteria: (1) they served youth ages 14 to 24, (2) they were not already involved in another evaluation, and (3) they were not facing implementation challenges. The evaluation also required that sites have multiple youth facilitators, a regular flow of youth through the program, and interest in providing additional training.

We selected Catholic Charities of Wayne County in New York and Youth and Family Services in South Dakota as the two sites that best met these criteria (Table II.1). When invited to participate, each site had three core youth facilitators and four to five additional facilitators who filled in as needed. Both sites used two facilitators to co-facilitate each session using the *Relationship Smarts PLUS* curriculum. Although the two sites used the same curriculum, the training is designed for use with any curriculum. The facilitators delivered the curriculum in traditional school settings and other settings, such as juvenile justice centers, Tribal schools, alternative schools, and community-based organizations. Both sites had demonstrated or expressed a perceived interest or need for additional facilitator training and feedback. They both agreed to participate in the evaluation for three semesters—from the fall of the 2018–2019 school year through the fall of the 2019–2020 school year.

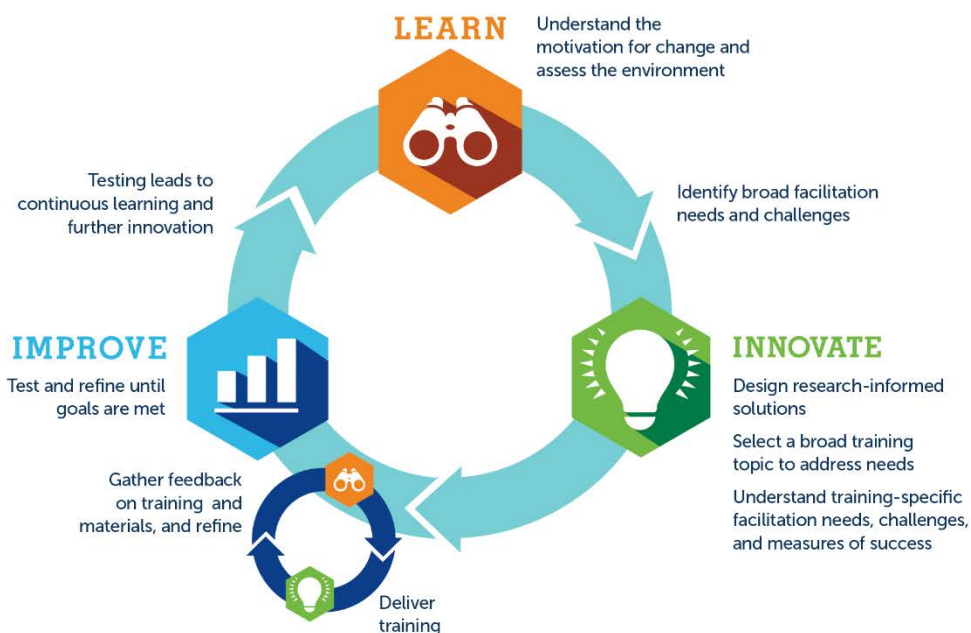
Table II.1. Characteristics of sites selected for the formative evaluation

| Characteristics | Catholic Charities | Youth and Family Services |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| Curricula | <i>Relationship Smarts PLUS</i> | <i>Relationship Smarts PLUS</i> |
| Setting | 11 high schools | 7 or 8 high schools, 1 alternative high school, 1 juvenile justice center, and schools on Native American reservations |
| Age of youth served | 15–24 years | 14–19 years |
| Facilitation format | Co-facilitation | Co-facilitation |
| Number of facilitators | 3 core youth facilitators; 5 additional staff who fill in as needed | 3 core youth facilitators; 4 additional staff who fill in as needed |
| Number of youth served (2017–2018) | 500–600 per year | 1,000 per year |

B. Evaluation framework

We used the Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²) framework (Derr et al. 2017) to structure and guide our collaboration with each site (Figure II.1). When applied to a formative evaluation, the LI² framework defines three interrelated phases of collaboration between researchers and practitioners—the Learn, Innovate, and Improve phases. For the Learn phase of the framework, we worked closely with supervisors and facilitators at each site to identify and assess in broad terms their facilitation needs and challenges. This assessment helped establish the context for the training curriculum. We describe the details of this assessment in Chapter III. Next, for the Innovate phase, we used the findings from our assessment to develop a menu of possible training topics from which the sites could select. For a selected topic, we then worked with the staff to refine our understanding of their specific training needs and developed pilot training modules that would address those needs. We describe the details of this topic selection and module development process in Chapter III. During the Improve phase, members of the evaluation team delivered the pilot training modules to facilitators at each site. The facilitators then tried implementing what they learned from the training when delivering the *Relationship Smarts PLUS* curriculum to youth. We collaboratively refined the training modules based on the facilitators’ experiences, the feedback we received, and the changes staff requested. We describe the details of this process in Chapter IV.

Figure II.1. Overview of evaluation framework



Source: Adapted from Derr et al. (2017).

We repeated the Innovate and Improve phases of the framework three times, so that each site selected and received training on three different topics. The first cycle occurred during the fall semester of the 2018–2019 school year. The second cycle happened during the spring semester of the same school year. The third cycle took place during the fall semester of the following school year (2019–2020). Although each semester focused on a different training topic, we encouraged facilitators to continue to apply what they learned in the first two cycles during subsequent cycles. As a result, we continued to monitor and gather feedback on (1) the training and tools from the first cycle (fall 2018) during the subsequent two training cycles (spring 2019 and fall 2019) and (2) the training and tools from the second cycle (spring 2019)

during the subsequent third cycle (fall 2019). Facilitators applied what they learned from the final training topic only once (in fall 2019).

C. Data sources

We collected data from a variety of sources to monitor and assess the development and implementation of the facilitation training curriculum (Table II.2). First, during each training cycle, we conducted two rounds of individual phone interviews with the facilitators and supervisors at each site. The first round of interviews focused on getting each person’s feedback on the training itself and any challenges facilitators faced implementing the strategies after the training. Based on this early feedback, we modified the training materials to help facilitators better use the strategies they learned. We held a second round of interviews with the same facilitators and supervisors about a month later to get deeper reflections on any challenges the facilitators faced when implementing the strategies they learned during the training and whether they thought the strategies worked.

Table II.2. Data sources for the formative evaluation

| Data source | Description | Frequency |
|--|--|---|
| Interviews with facilitators and supervisors | Discussions conducted at the start and end of each cycle | Two rounds of 30- to 45-minute interviews per cycle |
| Observations of facilitators | Trainer-conducted, in-person observations of facilitators using the strategies from each module | Two rounds of observations per cycle |
| End-of-cycle debriefing discussions | Reflective discussions that used human-centered design activities to elicit targeted feedback on data collected during each cycle and key aspects of the training from facilitators and supervisors; the discussions sought to collaboratively define key findings | Once per cycle |
| Youth survey data | Entry and exit surveys completed by youth | Once per cycle |

Second, during each cycle, a member of the evaluation team conducted two rounds of in-person observations of the facilitators as they delivered the *Relationship Smarts PLUS* curriculum to youth. The trainer and a supervisor from the HMRE program both observed facilitators and independently rated their facilitation using an observation tool developed for this evaluation. The trainer and supervisor then compared their ratings and notes on the facilitator’s use of strategies to refine the ratings and benchmarks for the items on the observation tool. Depending upon the schedule, the trainer also shared feedback with each facilitator he observed, including areas of strength and tips for improvement.

These observations served two purposes. First, we wanted to understand whether and how facilitators were applying the training strategies in the classroom, to provide feedback to facilitators on their use of the strategies, and to provide feedback to supervisors on how they could monitor and coach the facilitators themselves. Second, we used input we received from supervisors and facilitators during and after the observations to refine the structured observation tool we had developed for the in-person observations. The tool consisted of a system of benchmarks for rating the appropriate use of training strategies, which we adjusted over time based on staff feedback. We included this tool as part of the curriculum materials we developed.

Although facilitators and supervisors said they liked the direct feedback from the trainer during each round of observations, staff at both sites offered thoughtful suggestions for updating the observation tool and structuring it to make it more useful. First, the tool, as initially designed, was too long; for example,

in Cycle 1, it was four pages. In subsequent cycles, it was even longer. Second, the tool used a scoring system that supervisors found too cumbersome to use in real time. For example, they had to rate facilitators’ use of and comfort with training strategies on a five-point scale as well as check for progress on key skills and benchmarks. Some of these benchmarks for use of facilitation skills were also unclear to supervisors and required more context or explanation.

To address these challenges, we refined the scale and items to be clearer and more usable and added examples for context (Figure II.2). We also added a “Key Takeaways” sheet that enables supervisors (or, in some cases, trainers) to document the key feedback to deliver to the facilitator. We designed the sheet so that supervisors could give facilitators concrete feedback immediately after the observation, so they had time to process and think about areas of strength and improvement before their next class or supervisory meeting. Finally, we streamlined the final tool to be significantly shorter, with items reorganized by the natural flow of a lesson, rather than by topic.

Figure II.2. Sample of refined observation tool

Name: _____

Check the box that best describes the facilitator’s behavior.

| | DID THIS WELL | | ATTEMPTED TO DO THIS BUT NEEDS IMPROVEMENT | | | DID NOT DO THIS AT ALL | NOT APPLICABLE OR NOT POSSIBLE IN CLASS CONTEXT |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| START OF SESSION: | | | | | | | |
| Facilitator began session using high personal energy | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Facilitator began session with an opening activity | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Facilitator actively greeted students by name as they entered the room | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| THROUGHOUT SESSION: Managing Energy | | | | | | | |
| Facilitator made strategic deviations from standard content delivery to manage/reset energy | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Facilitator used varied speech patterns like emphasis, enunciation, change in cadence, dramatic pauses, hand gestures, facial expressions to add energy to the session | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| [For multi-hour sessions only] Facilitator used activities at times when a natural energy drop was expected (for example, in opening the session, after break or lunch, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| THROUGHOUT SESSION: Debriefing | | | | | | | |
| Facilitators engaged in a debrief of each activity that was well organized and integrated into the activity and lesson | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Facilitator provided clear and concise instructions for the debrief, with little or no clarification or additional information needed | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Facilitator engaged in active listening, paraphrasing back and confirming important concepts, and insights | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

As a third data source, we conducted separate debriefing discussions with staff at each site at the end of each cycle. In these sessions, we summarized the feedback we received from facilitators and supervisors, as well as our own observations, and asked staff to reflect on the data and share additional improvements or suggestions. We proposed a set of changes to the training and supplementary materials based on the feedback and came to consensus as a group about the improvements to make.

Finally, we analyzed four questions from the program exit survey data.² Each site asked youth a standardized set of survey questions at program exit as part of the site's grant requirements. To assess possible improvement in youth engagement as a result of the training, we examined the difference in measures that related to whether youth found the program valuable and whether they learned from it. We compared responses for cohorts of youth who received the program before or after any training occurred. First, we looked at a measure that asked youth how much they thought the program helped them. Responses were on a three-point scale: 1 (a lot), 2 (some), and 3 (not at all). Second, we looked at a three-item scale that measured perceived changes in relationship skills. This measure asked youth three questions: (1) whether they better understood what makes a relationship healthy, (2) whether they learned new skills in the program that they planned to use in their relationships, and (3) the degree to which they were confident in their abilities to use the skills and knowledge presented in the program. Responses to those items were on a four-point scale: 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) and we took an average of the three items.

² The exit survey was part of the Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management (nFORM) data collection for this grant program.

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III. Developing the Facilitation Skills Training Curriculum

We began the process of developing the facilitation skills training curriculum by, first, broadly defining the training needs of HMRE facilitators and, second, working closely with participating staff at each site to identify which training topics would fill their most pressing needs. We ultimately developed and refined training materials that included three modules selected by the sites. In the remainder of this chapter, we provide more detailed information on each of these steps.

A. Defining the training needs of HMRE facilitators

To set a foundation for our collaboration with the two formative evaluation sites, we conducted semistructured interviews with staff from a broader set of eight youth-serving HMRE programs funded by OFA. We used the interviews to understand the broad facilitation needs and challenges of HMRE grantees, learn about existing training and supervisory practices, and ensure the new facilitation skills training curriculum we planned to develop would be responsive and targeted to the needs of practitioners. The grantees we interviewed were community-based organizations that served youth in urban, rural, and suburban settings. Most provided some or all of their HMRE programming to youth in high schools. Several of the grantees also delivered HMRE programming to youth in community settings through summer programs.

From these interviews, we learned the HMRE grantees generally employed two to six facilitators who worked with youth, and the facilitators had varied professional backgrounds and skills. Most had experience facilitating groups when they were hired. Two grantees reported they hired facilitators who were certified teachers or who had significant classroom teaching experience. One grantee required facilitators to be masters-level, licensed clinical therapists. Some facilitators had specialized training or qualifications, such as experience working with Tribal youth, providing services to fathers, or conducting case management.

As expected, most grantees reported that the training they provided their facilitators was limited to their selected HMRE curriculum, and that training on building and strengthening general facilitation skills was rare. Among the grantees we interviewed, all reported that their facilitators received the requisite HMRE curriculum training from the curriculum developer. A few grantees provided training on additional topics, such as classroom management, trauma-informed approaches, and domestic violence. Only one grantee provided training on broader facilitation skills, including: 1) how to manage the classroom environment, pacing and time management; 2) how to use a youth-centered approach to facilitation; 3) developing confidence and moving away from teaching from the manual; and 4) using targeted activities and questions to assess knowledge and skill application. Other program supports for facilitation included informal observations, debriefings after program sessions, and regular team meetings to discuss challenges and staff concerns.

The findings from these interviews shaped our subsequent approach to developing the facilitation skills training curriculum in several ways:

- Given the limited focus on facilitation skills reported by grantees, we determined the curriculum we planned to develop could not assume a baseline level of expertise. Rather, the curriculum would have to provide clear guidance and be designed for facilitators with limited or no previous exposure to formal facilitation skills training.

- Based on more specific information that grantees shared, we determined the curriculum should focus primarily on three specific areas: implementing approaches to improve youth’s engagement, building stronger connections and trust with them, and addressing distractions and fatigue in the classroom. For example, grantees expressed a desire to create culturally safe spaces and a climate of trust in which youth from diverse backgrounds felt comfortable participating in class and sharing their experiences. Grantees also wanted to learn how to keep youth interested in the lessons and minimize behavioral problems and other distractions.
- Grantees would need guidance on how to adapt the strategies taught in the training to their intended populations and variable program settings, such as small or large class sizes, youth with specific needs, limited class time, and community-based versus school-based settings. We heard from grantees that students’ varied learning and participation styles made it difficult for facilitators to ensure each student absorbed the program material.
- We determined training and guidance for supervisors on topics such as conducting observations and providing regular feedback was important and could enhance their ability to provide ongoing support to facilitators. Grantees expressed interest in resources for supervisors, such as formal observation and assessment tools, as well as training or guidance on providing useful and targeted feedback.

B. Refining and selecting from the menu of training topics

After synthesizing what we learned from the grantee interviews, we created an initial list of topics for facilitation skills training for use with our formative evaluation sites. The list included the following topics: (1) participant-centered facilitation, to help facilitators learn the difference between that and lecture-based teaching and how to balance structured activities with spontaneous learning; (2) using debriefing strategies with youth to draw out key takeaways, highlight insights, and guide discussions; (3) building trust with youth to improve learning; (4) managing and resetting energy levels in the classroom to optimize engagement; and (5) addressing personal bias and cultural sensitivity.

We used this list as a starting point for more in-depth discussions with our two formative evaluation sites about their specific facilitation needs and challenges to ultimately inform the development of the specific curriculum modules. For each site, we convened a detailed strategic planning discussion intended to (1) develop a shared understanding of the specific facilitation needs and challenges, (2) select a specific training topic that would address these needs and challenges, and (3) discuss how we would monitor and measure the success of the training. The strategic planning meetings included program directors, supervisors, facilitators, and members of the evaluation team from Mathematica and Public Strategies. We conducted the first strategic planning meeting in person to develop strong personal relationships and get to know the staff at each site. We conducted similar planning sessions at the start of each subsequent cycle (semester). These subsequent planning sessions took place via a video conference call.

In the first strategic planning meeting, staff in each site participated in brainstorming activities to refine the initial list of broad training topics the evaluation team had developed, which would serve as the menu of training topics for the sites. We used the Rose, Bud, Thorn activity (Box III.1) at the start of the meeting to encourage facilitators and supervisors to share the cross-cutting strengths, opportunities, and challenges for facilitation in the classroom. They provided this input as it related to them individually, as

part of co-facilitating, as well as related to supervision. Based on the information generated through this activity (Table III.1), we updated and refined the initial list of potential training topics. For example, challenges and opportunities identified by the facilitators and supervisors included new training topics that were not part of our initial list, such as managing relationships with and expectations of school staff, and additional learning goals for existing topics, such as the need for providing guidance to facilitators about personal disclosure in addition to managing youth disclosure. The updates and refinements led to a revised menu of potential training topics that was both longer and more specific.

Box III.1. Rose, Bud, Thorn activity



Rose: A highlight, success, small win, or something positive



Bud: New ideas, areas for growth, opportunities, or something you look forward to learning or experiencing



Thorn: A challenge you experienced or something you could use support for

Using colored sticky notes, participants take a few minutes to reflect and write down roses, buds, and thorns on a given topic. Then, they share their thoughts and reflect as a group on the similarities and variations.

Table III.1. Examples of facilitation strengths, opportunities, and challenges identified by program facilitators and staff

| | Classroom-level | Student-level | Co-facilitation | Supervision |
|----------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Roses (strengths) | Creative and flexible approach, safe classroom environment, and engaging curriculum activities and content | Building genuine connections with youth and peer-to-peer interaction | Learning from each other’s strengths, and listening and offering constructive feedback | Open communication and regular debriefing with colleagues, trust in supervisor, and frequent feedback |
| Buds (opportunities) | Tailoring activities for specific youth populations, newly updated curriculum, working with younger students, and building relationships with new schools and districts | None identified | Leveraging support and constructive feedback from each other and developing relationships with new staff | Need for feedback and communication with school administrators, district staff, and school teachers; new staff starting in fall 2018 |
| Thorns (challenges) | Building trust and managing expectations with the classroom teacher, managing energy in the classroom, making each activity interesting and engaging, managing personal disclosure (facilitator and youth), and youth engagement | Developing trust and connections with individual youth in a very limited time | Managing roles and responsibilities and avoiding taking each other for granted | Limited formal training, tools, and systems for assessment and feedback |

When it came time for sites to select a specific training topic, we presented them with a menu of options, such as the one shown in Table III.2. We asked each site to select a single topic for each of the three cycles of the formative evaluation. To assist each site in making its selection, we facilitated an interactive prioritization exercise (for the first cycle) or allowed program staff to cast votes through an anonymous online poll (for the second and third cycles). By chance, both sites ended up selecting the same three topics. They both selected Managing Energy for the first cycle; Debriefing: Drawing Out Teachable Moments for the second cycle; and Building Trust, Building Safety, and Challenging the Comfort Zone for the third cycle.

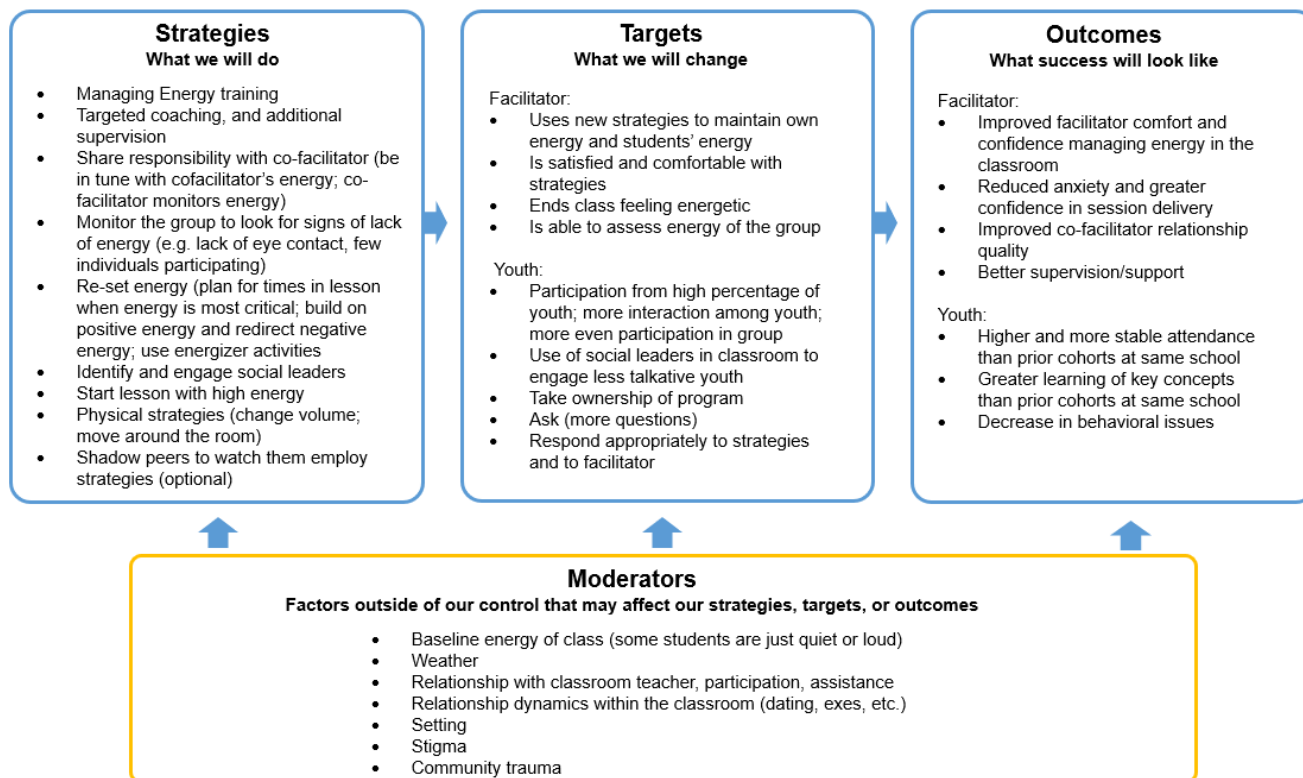
During each strategic planning meeting, we also discussed the strategies each topic would cover and how we would measure the success of the training modules. Using a road map for change, a key component of the LI² framework, the study team facilitated a discussion about what staff would like to see change after they implemented the training (Figure III.1). Those targets were the desired goals or outcomes for each topic. The targets included changes in youth participation, facilitator confidence, and classroom dynamics, which might be achieved through using the identified strategies. Staff suggested potential skills and strategies they felt might be useful for achieving the targets. We incorporated skills or strategies the group thought were important but were not already part of the strategies we had defined for each module before the training.

Table III.2. Refined menu of training topics

| Topic | Learning goals |
|--|---|
| Participant-centered facilitation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a foundation for using experiential learning as a best practice for sharing information with youth. • Understand the difference between lecture-based teaching and participant-centered facilitation. • Learn how to strike a balance between structured activities and spontaneous learning. |
| Building trust, building safety; Challenging the comfort zone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentionally build and maintain trust with individual students and within the group learning environment. • Use that trust and challenge students to begin exploring new skills and behaviors that might feel unnatural, silly, or unfamiliar at first. • Build trust to make it safe for students to follow the facilitator outside of their comfort zone. |
| Debriefing: Drawing out teachable moments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectively use debriefing skills to guide discussions with students and highlight the insights, connections, and interpretations identified by the group. • Increase ability to effectively debrief activities to draw out insights and learning points from students. |
| Managing energy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase understanding about the energy cycle (for example, moving from low to high energy and back) and how it directly effects students' abilities to engage and learn. • Learn tips and techniques for managing and resetting energy in the classroom. |
| Addressing personal bias and cultural sensitivity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect and engage with youth from different cultural backgrounds, genders, and ages. • Learn a strength-based approach to counter negative personal biases, as well as increase awareness of the ways in which personal beliefs and cultural elements (conscious or unconscious) can have profound effects on how facilitators engage and share information in the classroom. |
| Incorporating essential facilitation skills: Authority, adaptability, safety, dependability, engagement, and communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase knowledge and understanding of the essential skills that make a great facilitator: authority, adaptability, safety, dependability, engagement, and communication. • Help facilitators intentionally define, refine, and integrate these essential skills in their program delivery with students. |
| Trauma-informed facilitation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand and use strategies for addressing and connecting with youth who have experienced trauma or violence. |
| Best practices in feedback and supervision | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become familiar with a framework for supervisors to monitor, assess, and coach facilitators on an ongoing basis. • Learn how to provide appropriate feedback and use tools for monitoring and assessment of facilitation skills. |
| Climate-building in the classroom | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn to create and maintain inclusive classrooms and foster a positive classroom climate. |

| Topic | Learning goals |
|--|--|
| Managing personal disclosure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss how to handle and address personal disclosure of sensitive information during classroom discussions or activities. • Discuss boundaries around facilitators' personal disclosure. |
| Managing relationships with and expectations of school staff | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set clear expectations for classroom teachers' participation (or lack thereof). • Set ground rules for and manage youth behavior during lessons. • Ensure facilitators and school teachers are interpreting and implementing school policies consistently. |

Figure III.1. Example Road Map for Change for Managing Energy



C. Developing the training materials

For each of the three selected training topics (Managing Energy, Debriefing, and Building Trust), members of the evaluation team developed a draft curriculum and associated training materials to pilot with the formative evaluation sites. In developing the curriculum and associated training materials, the team built on and adapted existing materials that one of the team members, an experienced trainer and curriculum specialist at Public Strategies had compiled and curated. The trainer has decades of experience in providing training for youth in school and community-based settings and within the juvenile justice system, and technical support to state and federally funded organizations. For each topic, the training module contained a set of presentation slides and short lessons with conceptual and practical content on the selected topic, interspersed with activities designed for facilitators to model, practice, and engage with the material. The team also developed (1) hands-on supplementary materials that facilitators could use either while planning for or during their sessions, such as checklists and tip sheets (Table III.3); and (2) an observation tool designed for supervisors to monitor and provide feedback to facilitators.

Table III.3. Supplementary materials, by topic

| Module name | Supplementary materials |
|-----------------|---|
| Managing Energy | Tip sheet on managing energy, energizer activities |
| Debriefing | Two-minute debriefing back-pocket tips, debriefing questions, debriefing activities, debriefing checklist |
| Building Trust | Building trust back-pocket tips, tip sheet on managing dysfunctional behavior |

IV. Implementing and Improving the Facilitation Skills Training Curriculum

We worked together with our two formative evaluation sites to use a systematic, evidence-informed approach to implement and refine the training modules over three cycles, starting in the fall 2018 school semester and continuing through the fall 2019 school semester. Each semester-long cycle involved (1) implementing one module of the facilitation skills training curriculum, (2) tracking how facilitators used the training strategies and materials of that particular module as well as any previous ones, (3) obtaining feedback from the facilitators on the trainings and materials, (4) assessing facilitators' perceptions of how youth engagement and learning changed as a result of the trainings, (5) integrating the feedback into the facilitation skills training curriculum and tools, and (6) having facilitators apply feedback from the observations and updated tools into their facilitation during and after each cycle.

A. Implementing facilitation skills training

Facilitators and supervisors in each site attended a training at the start of each cycle focused on one particular training module. Trainings consisted of lecture-based content, interactive demonstrations, and opportunities for practice through role-playing and small-group activities (Table IV.1). Each training covered some conceptual and theoretical content to orient the facilitators to the selected module topic, as well as instruction on specific strategies and activities for them to incorporate into the classroom (Roby et al. 2021). A single member of the evaluation team from Public Strategies delivered all trainings.

Table IV.1. Training modules content and materials

| Topic | Key content covered | Timeline |
|---|--|---|
| Managing energy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levels of energy typical for students, ranging from 1 at the lowest point to 3 at the highest point Anticipating times and strategies to reset energy (such as reengaging students whose attention has slipped) Energizer activities for regulating and managing energy levels Physical strategies for resetting energy levels Co-facilitation Managing positive and negative energy (for example, engagement and rambunctiousness, respectively) | Training: Fall 2018 Implemented and refined: Fall 2018–Fall 2019 |
| Debriefing: Drawing out teachable moments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using the debriefing sequence of describing what happened (what?), interpreting (so what?), and transferring the lesson to other contexts (now what?) Debriefing activities and techniques Planning for debriefing Debriefing with constraints | Training: Spring 2019 Implemented and refined: Spring 2019–Fall 2019 |
| Building trust, building safety; Challenging the comfort zone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key concepts for building trust and challenging the comfort zone Strategies to develop trust, such as intentional use of students' names and validation of students' comments Growth versus trauma Managing negative peer interactions and promoting positive interactions | Training: Fall 2019 Implemented and refined: Fall 2019 |

The first training on managing energy described the energy levels typical for students, demonstrated strategies for facilitators to recognize and reset energy levels, and discussed the differences between positive and negative energy. For the second training on debriefing, the curriculum covered the use of the debriefing sequence of (1) describing what happened (what?), (2) interpreting what happened (so what?), and (3) transferring the lesson to other contexts (now what?). The sequence aims to draw out students, encourage them to engage with the content, and apply it to their lives. The training focused on using debriefing to uncover students' observations, help them process their lessons, and consider practical applications of a lesson as well as applying tips and techniques to facilitate an engaging debrief. For the third training, the curriculum focused on the importance of building trust and the strategies that foster trust. By building a safe environment of trust, youth feel able to take risks, incorporate new learning, and grow beyond their current comfort zone. Finally, each of the trainings emphasized the importance of intentional planning, along with a co-facilitator (as applicable) before facilitation to maximize the effectiveness of these strategies. The trainer provided tips about (1) which kinds of strategies to use when and (2) how to review the curriculum and determine which strategies to incorporate and how.

The length of the training varied across the three cycles, based on the content of the module being covered. The training for both the first cycle (on managing energy) and third cycle (on building trust) lasted about six hours. The training for the second cycle (on debriefing) was more time-intensive and lasted about 12 hours, spread over a day and a half. All three cycles included time for facilitators to participate and practice. Based on feedback from the facilitators after the first cycle, the training in the second cycle added structured teach-backs for facilitators to practice the new debriefing skills. With a partner, facilitators chose part of a lesson to teach. They had an evening to brainstorm and prepare an activity and set of questions to help them debrief the lesson. Teach-backs provided an opportunity for facilitators to prepare and deliver a mock lesson using the debriefing strategies and receive real-time feedback from the trainer and their peers.

B. Facilitators' feedback on training module and materials

In the interviews we conducted with facilitators toward the start and end of each cycle, facilitators shared which strategies and materials they used in their lessons with youth. They also described the usefulness of the strategies and where they felt they needed more support to effectively use the strategies.

1. Facilitators' experience with training strategies

Facilitators actively incorporated the strategies they learned during training. Facilitators at both sites indicated they had the time and capacity to implement new strategies as they learned them and continue implementing strategies they had learned in past cycles. For example, by the second and third cycles, we heard the strategies for managing energy had become a natural part of their facilitation sequence. They also reported the strategies from the three cycles worked together fluidly.

Facilitation strategy spotlight 1: Using quick energizers to manage energy

Quick energizers are go-to activities that facilitators can inject into a lesson any time energy begins to drop off. Examples include Dance Break (a three-minute dance-off), Word Scrambles (brief word games), and Pop Quiz (trivia on topics of interest to students). Facilitators in the study found these activities were particularly helpful in resetting energy and optimizing student engagement.▲

For each of the three cycles, facilitators used some strategies more frequently than others. For example, for the cycle on managing energy, they reported that physical strategies were highly beneficial in managing energy for their groups. Examples of physical strategies included facilitators moving around the room or students forming small groups. For the cycle on debriefing, the most frequently used strategies were a guided group reflection after a discussion or activity and using neutral responses to students' comments. For the cycle on building trust, the most frequently used strategy was intentionally validating students' comments or successes.

After completing the training on managing energy, facilitators said they felt empowered with a concrete set of strategies and activities they could use to monitor and reset energy in the classroom. Facilitators were also more aware of and intentional about their positioning in the classroom, reading the energy levels of students, and adjusting as necessary by using specific energizer activities. Especially for new staff, the tools and strategies helped them manage and respond to different situations. As co-facilitators, they were more aware of the energy dynamic and their role in engaging youth in the classroom.

Facilitators found the strategies and knowledge from the debriefing training valuable but also more challenging to apply in practice than other strategies. Debriefing was the longest training, at 12 hours. It was also a more intensive topic to learn to implement, but staff saw great value in it. Facilitators noted the debriefing strategies increased their students' involvement in discussions and improved the students' recall of the content. Facilitators also felt the debriefing strategies pulled more students into the conversation because they encouraged slowing down, reflection, and connection with a student's own context. Even with the experience of the teach-backs and the feedback they received from the trainer, facilitators felt it took them several weeks to become comfortable applying and using the debriefing questions as intended.

The strategies for building trust helped facilitators become even more intentional in their interactions with youth. In some cases, they noticed students had built greater trust among themselves because of these strategies. Several facilitators said they set expectations and developed group agreements with the classroom. They also referred to those expectations when needed, especially to remind students to be respectful or to halt side conversations. Using and learning students' names was important and made a noticeable difference. Some did this by placing tent cards on students' desks or greeting students by name when passing out their workbooks. Several facilitators at both sites said they found a tip sheet on managing dysfunctional behaviors helpful, but others said they had not needed to use the tips yet.

Facilitators reported the strategies they chose also depended upon the classroom context and characteristics of students in their classrooms. For example, facilitators found some activities worked better with either younger or older youth but not both due to the activities' format or level of complexity. Facilitators noted they had to be prepared to respond to the group's level of engagement. For example, when groups had extremely high energy, facilitators sometimes had to use multiple strategies to redirect the group's energy. Managing this high energy became easier when facilitators were prepared with different strategies and tools to adapt to changing engagement needs in the moment.

Facilitators found other strategies to be useful in almost any context. For example, they found beginning the lesson with high energy and using music at the start of the group (both managing energy strategies) were helpful strategies they could easily incorporate and use frequently. Similarly, many facilitators reported consistently using specific strategies for building trust (such as setting and returning to group agreements, validating students' comments, and learning and using students' names) throughout the third cycle.

2. Use of intentional planning

Across all three cycles, facilitators and supervisors discussed the usefulness of planning ahead and intentionally mapping out when and how they could integrate the facilitation strategies into the planned lessons. Starting in the first cycle and increasingly over time, facilitators noted that although they used to plan informally before each lesson, they now made planning a structured and integral part of their routine. Co-facilitators met before each session or at the start of each week to define roles (such as who would lead which portion of each lesson), determine the activities and strategies that would fit best with the content, and discuss how they would tailor activities to the context of the students in their classes.

Facilitators found that planning helped (1) build confidence and comfort with the material and with using the facilitation strategies in their appropriate context, (2) define the specific roles that co-facilitators would play ahead of time, and (3) balance the workload so one facilitator would not be overburdened. With co-facilitators, planning also served as an opportunity for veteran facilitators to mentor co-facilitators with less experience. Facilitators who were relatively new indicated the intentional planning was critical to building their confidence and preparing them to better engage with youth in a typically unpredictable high school classroom. Given these lessons, we revisited the curriculum to add further emphasis on the importance of planning ahead and created some activities in the training to simulate and demonstrate the planning experience.

3. Use of supplementary materials

As part of the training for each cycle, facilitators and supervisors received handouts and materials that listed the different strategies and activities covered in the training. For the first cycle, the trainer provided facilitators with a tip sheet on managing energy and a checklist of energizer activities and strategies for managing energy that the training covered. Facilitators found this tip sheet initially very helpful as they learned the strategies and energizer activities and incorporated them into their planning process and sessions. By the second cycle, most facilitators reported they rarely used the tip sheet because they were already comfortable with most of the strategies and no longer needed to refer to the materials. In contrast, many facilitators continued referring to the supplementary materials provided for the second and third cycles, such as a handout that described the purpose and suggested use of the debriefing sequence: What? So what? Now what? Facilitators appreciated materials that were brief, laminated, and easy to review. They continued to refer to such materials later in the training cycles.

Facilitation strategy spotlight 2: Using the debriefing sequence

During the debriefing process, a participant-centered facilitator guides students to explore their experiences of an activity or discussion from three critical vantage points. Integrating this sequence of questions is critical to the success of the debriefing.

- **Describing: What?**

Facilitators prompt students to describe what happened during the group interaction or activity. Well-phrased “what” questions lead the group to key time periods or interactions that just occurred during the activity or exercise.

- **Interpreting: So what?**

Facilitators guide youth to connect the group’s observations of the experience to the curriculum content. The facilitator’s prompts stimulate the group to generate interpretations and insights and discover meaning.

- **Transferring: Now what?**

This takes the lesson students have learned from a classroom activity and transfers the learning into a real-life situation or scenario. The more connections (transfer points) students identify with their own experience during the debriefing process, the more concretely it anchors the skill or concept into their daily lives. This process also helps them create plans for the next time an opportunity presents itself.▲

C. Suggested improvements for future replication

Overall, facilitators and supervisors at both sites reported finding the training valuable. They said each cycle of training helped facilitators build comfort and confidence in using enhanced facilitation techniques while delivering the curriculum to youth. Staff also shared how the emphasis on intentional planning throughout the three cycles had been especially beneficial for integrating and using the training strategies successfully. In the rest of this section, we briefly summarize recommendations for improving each of the three modules we incorporated into the final curriculum draft.

- **Managing Energy.** Staff felt the supplementary materials on managing energy could be further developed to include descriptions of energizer activities (rather than just a list) for later reference, so we shared those with facilitators. They also reported it would be helpful to practice integrating the new facilitation strategies into class sessions. Based on this feedback, we added time for practice and for conducting guided teach-backs in the next cycle.
- **Debriefing and Drawing Out Teachable Moments.** Because debriefing was more challenging to implement in the classroom, facilitators suggested it was important to increase comfort levels with how and where to use the debriefing sequence during the training. For example, facilitators at both sites indicated debriefing could feel a little “uncomfortable” and “unnatural” at first compared to the strategies for managing energy, which were easier for them to integrate. However, as one facilitator pointed out, “The more you do it, the better it goes.” Many facilitators also found the debriefing teach-backs to be challenging at first but were glad they had the opportunity to learn from them. Their comfort increased in the third cycle, but this continued to be an area where facilitators felt they could improve. Based on this feedback, we incorporated additional time for practice during the training, as well as more specific guidance on integrating debriefing questions in the classroom.
- **Building Trust, Building Safety and Challenging the Comfort Zone.** Facilitators reported some trust-building strategies were not always effective in engaging students in their context. Facilitators felt certain activities, such as the trust falls and the mousetrap pass (an activity that requires a group of students to pass a mousetrap to one another to build trust), could be useful in certain scenarios, but not others. For example, they felt that trust falls might not work well with students who have space boundaries, and the mousetrap pass might work better with older or better-behaved groups. The trainer incorporated this feedback by providing specific suggestions for the context in which to use specific activities. These strategies also aimed to challenge facilitators or youth to move outside of their comfort zone. Although facilitators said these strategies could be effective even when

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Facilitation strategy spotlight 3: Validating students’ comments and questions to build trust

A facilitator’s actions when asking and answering questions demonstrate to students whether the facilitator is trustworthy. Facilitators highlighted these strategies as important to developing a trusting and safe space for students. Facilitators can build trust in several ways:

- Answering a student’s questions respectfully within the context of the curriculum taught up to that point
- Avoiding personal bias or opinions and sticking to the curriculum
- Directing questions with right or wrong answers to the group, not an individual
- Asking only opinion-based questions of a specific student to avoiding putting the student on the spot
- Validating a student’s effort in responding to a question, even if the response is inaccurate ▲

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students were uncomfortable, they sometimes found it difficult to know when to stop pushing their students. Facilitators also recommended adding content on addressing trauma and student disclosures, such as tips on how to address sensitive information. We integrated these into the module.

D. Assessing youth engagement and learning

Staff from both sites shared their perceptions of youth engagement. In interviews, facilitators and supervisors said they perceived positive changes in youth engagement in the classroom and believed youth were more engaged in the HMRE program sessions after the facilitators had received training. Facilitators were appropriately hesitant to draw strong causal links between the strategies and increased engagement due to other factors that might have been at play (for example, classroom composition). They noted specific changes they felt related to the training topic for the cycle and shared anecdotal examples to illustrate how specific strategies and activities had affected students in their classes. When reflecting on the first cycle (on managing energy), some facilitators noted immediate improvement in student engagement when applying the new strategies. For example, facilitators at one site described a high-energy group that struggled to engage with a video that was part of a lesson. Based on a recommendation from the evaluation team trainer, the facilitators began using strategies to more actively engage youth while they watched the video, such as asking youth to write responses on sticky notes during the video. Facilitators reported an immediate difference in engagement with the same groups of students when they implemented this suggestion in their next class. Similarly, for the second cycle (on debriefing), facilitators reported that when using the debriefing strategies, the youth's learning was deeper, they were more involved and focused on the discussion, and their recall had improved. For the third cycle (on building trust), some facilitators felt the strategies they used improved trust among students in their classes, and strategies such as intentionally using student names helped youth feel more, welcome, heard, and valued.

In addition to discussing possible changes in youth engagement with staff, we also examined entry and exit survey data from the youth, which grantees collected as part of their grant requirements (Table IV.2). The survey asked youth to rate how helpful they found the program on a three-point scale: 1 (a lot), 2 (some), and 3 (not at all). We found cohorts of youth whose facilitators were trained on at least one of the modules were statistically significantly ($p \leq 0.05$) more likely to say they thought the program helped them than cohorts of youth taught by the same facilitators before they received the training. The survey included a three-item scale ($\alpha = 0.876$) that measured perceived changes in relationship skills by asking youth whether they better understood what makes a relationship healthy, whether they learned new skills they planned to use in their relationships, and the degree to which they were confident in their abilities to use the skills and knowledge from the program. We rated the responses to those items on a four-point scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Although youth whose facilitators had received training on at least one of the modules were more likely to report some improvement in their relationship skills, the difference across cohorts was not statistically significant.

Table IV.2. Post-test assessments of youth engagement and perceived relationship skills before and after facilitators received training

| Measure | Facilitators not trained (mean) | Facilitators trained on at least one module (mean) | Difference | Sample size |
|--|---------------------------------|--|------------|-------------|
| Youth's perceptions of how much the program helped them (one item) – 1 = a lot and 3 = not at all | 1.66 | 1.57 | -0.09** | 1,882 |
| Youth's perceived improvements in relationship skills (three items) – 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree | 3.31 | 3.35 | 0.04 | 1,865 |

*** p -value ≤ 0.01 , ** p -value ≤ 0.05 , * p -value ≤ 0.10 .

E. Integrating feedback into the final curriculum

At the end of each cycle, the evaluation team met with staff to better understand the strengths and challenges, and to consolidate the feedback received throughout the cycle (Table IV.3). Based on their feedback, we updated the facilitators' training curriculum materials and packaged them for use by other organizations or to serve as the basis for future research studies. The updated curriculum materials incorporated and built on the illustrative list of changes presented here as well as the suggestions for improvements to the trainings discussed earlier in this chapter.

Table IV.3. Sample list of changes made to improve the curriculum

| Updates to training content and materials |
|---|
| Included hands-on materials, such as tip sheets and back-pocket tips with descriptions and instructions for how to use them for each module |
| Added content and guidance for managing dysfunctional behaviors in the classroom |
| Added tips and strategies for effective co-facilitation and building trust and safety within the pairing of facilitators |
| Defined guidance for planning each session, including mapping out the specific steps for debriefing, building trust, and managing energy from the start |
| Included content on addressing trauma and students' disclosures, such as tips and steps to take when sensitive information is disclosed to the group |
| Included tips on how to manage high energy levels or energy in different contexts, such as limited or loud spaces |
| Included suggestions for optimal contexts in which to use different activities and strategies |
| Updates to training format and methods |
| Incorporated structured time (such as through teach-backs) to practice strategies and activities for building comfort and confidence |
| Modeled strategies during the training and shared hands-on descriptions of the activities for participants to follow |

F. Key lessons based on the formative evaluation

The evaluation yielded important lessons for formatively testing, improving, and packaging a facilitation training curriculum for use by other youth-serving organizations, and identifying areas for further study.

First, having program partners involved directly in developing and piloting the curriculum was a critical element for success. From the outset, we had a strong partnership with staff at each of the two organizations implementing and testing the trainings. In addition, staff bought into the LI² framework and

the steps for each phase. The team spent a full day with each site at the beginning of the process to learn about the staff and their needs. Facilitators and their supervisors were open about the challenges they faced in the classroom, eager to learn and apply their new skills, and willing to share ongoing feedback. We also had buy-in from the organizational leaders, so their staff could devote time to participating in the training, integrating the new skills into their curriculum and classroom environments, and sharing their successes and challenges with their colleagues in team meetings.

Second, we developed and adapted a facilitation training curriculum based on research and best practices in the field. To build and improve on the existing content, we co-created material to deal with the specific challenges and recommended solutions suggested by the sites, conducted the training, and conducted observations alongside a supervisor. Tailoring data-informed solutions to site-specific challenges and providing ongoing feedback were invaluable to the staff at each site. Having an experienced facilitation skills trainer with knowledge of the HMRE curriculum used at each site was extremely important to building and retaining trust.

Third, alignment on the key areas of growth and needs for staff and on some potential solutions within sites also facilitated the evaluation's success. Staff at each site, and across sites, generally agreed on the most pressing challenges they faced in the classroom. These shared priorities across staff and sites helped them buy in to the process. Staff also thought the content in the proposed training modules and the ideas we brainstormed to add to the training could potentially address their issues and boost youth engagement. We encourage others to use human-centered design activities to obtain staff consensus on the areas of strengths and growth opportunities and their suggestions for addressing key challenges.

Finally, we found it useful to rely on a clearly defined and replicable framework (the LI² framework) to plan and implement our collaboration with the sites. When undertaking this type of formative evaluation, we recommend having a clearly defined plan and steps to follow at the outset, and to be flexible in response to what participating stakeholders and partners are communicating.

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V. Conclusion

ACF funded Mathematica and Public Strategies to collaboratively develop and refine a facilitation training curriculum with two OFA grantees to address training needs and improve the quality of program delivery in the classroom. Initial exploratory discussions revealed that facilitation skills training was limited or nonexistent among most providers of HMRE programming to youth. The discussions also indicated facilitators would benefit from training in three facilitation topics they deemed most important: (1) how to manage and reset energy in the classroom; (2) how to deepen learning through debriefing; and (3) how to build trust and safety while challenging students' comfort zones. Organizational leaders also said they would like strategies for providing structured feedback and support to facilitators, which the final curriculum integrated into the training and observation process (Roby et al. 2021).

We used the LI² framework and human-centered design strategies to encourage program staff to reflect on their experiences and identify concrete steps to optimize the training curriculum and its implementation. Having a structured framework made it easy to follow and implement our plan. During our planning meetings, we determined the measures and time points for the qualitative and quantitative data collection to get feedback, the points when we would review the data together, and when we would change the curriculum.

Staff in both sites found the trainings immensely valuable and provided useful feedback for improvements. Facilitators said that after completing the trainings, they could deepen connections with their students, manage and reset energy in the classroom, and work towards building an environment of trust for youth to learn while growing and challenging their comfort zone. Intentional planning and integrating concrete strategies and tools offered and refined through the training helped staff improve their own confidence and comfort and increase engagement with youth in a mix of contexts. Based on staff input, we added and elaborated content in each of the modules, expanded opportunities and time for practice of strategies, developed visual and easy-to-use supplementary handouts and tools, and streamlined the observation form to optimize it for meaningful and constructive feedback.

This formative evaluation could not have been successful without several key elements: (1) a strong partnership based on early trust-building and knowledge-sharing activities, (2) the research and substantive expertise that went into developing and implementing the facilitation training curriculum, (3) an expert trainer to guide and support the development process, and (4) an evidence-informed and well-defined yet flexible formative evaluation framework. Although internal brainstorming can solve some challenges, having a training expert as part of the evaluation team enabled us to bring research and evidence to solving a problem and providing new ideas.

This evaluation showed how a formative evaluation could serve as the basis for efforts to improve programs and develop curriculum. We used the evaluation for the specific purpose of developing a facilitation training curriculum for HMRE program facilitators. However, broad-based strategies of learning about site-specific needs, brainstorming solutions, tailoring the solutions to specific challenges, and testing and refining those solutions could apply equally well for a range of programs and in any number of settings.

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