

## Workshops are different

### Some backgrounds

Workshops are different. Different from lectures, seminars, conferences, and formal education. They are also different from theatre, or playing games. (See table under)

This does not mean, that workshops are better than lectures or theatre or conferences. That depends strongly on the backgrounds. Also, lectures can be a part of a workshop; workshops can be part of a conference or enrich formal education; games have their place in workshops and workshops may use theatre techniques as role-plays.

Still the introduction of workshops in the field of education was a major landslide. The main reason for that is that workshops are *process oriented*. It is not any longer the contents or formal (authority) relationships that dictate form and methods. It is the interaction between people, expressed and facilitated in such a way, that experience and knowledge are shared optimally.

In Central and Eastern Europe, this form of education only started to be developed recently - after the political changes in 1989. There are probably many reasons for this. Important ones are certainly:

- the authoritarian basic attitude in the centralist marxist-leninist oriented societies;
- the high value attached to "real scientific" methods and data;
- information = power. Having information gave more grip on the situation, could be supporting to your power position, or endangering it when others had it. Information was widely used as a political power tool;
- information and education were used to manipulate; sometimes openly, sometimes under cover. This last point made many people loosing their faith in others - people thought in conspiracies and were sceptic about "good will".

Decentralisation, difference of opinion (especially on "hard and objective data"), soft human approaches, spreading of information, empowering the powerless, taking everybody serious, belief in basic good will and all these other things were not part of the political culture - mostly they were even openly considered to be a threat. This happened both in official structures (working brigades, party, state, mass organisations) and in the informal sphere (family, friends, dissident groups). Still, these are the keywords behind the term "workshop".

---

The ZHABA facilitators collective is a group of NGO facilitators. It helps non-profit organisations to improve their work. More information on <http://www.zhaba.cz>

© 2002 Stichting ZHABA facilitators collective  
(parts of) this text may only be copied or used in other publications after previous written consent of the Stichting ZHABA facilitators collective.

---

Also in the West, workshops are a relative new concept. They root in two completely different traditions.

The *liberal* educational tradition in North America and Europe, built upon the social-democratic educational and management experiments in the first half of last century and the *human resources* management approach of the nineteen sixties, developed the form of workshops. They were used to confront people with reality, to let them learn from theory, analyse together how improvements can be made, help them implement these improvements and make them function optimally.

The second root is in the development of the *educacion popular* in Latin America and Africa. Popular education is based on the notion that people without power *can* make a difference - when they get hold of the power that every group of people has. It started in the form of educational street-theatre, alternative liturgy and literacy education. It developed participative and interactive tools to analyse the basic problems of politically unjust situations. It gave poor small farmers, villagers, women the possibility to improve *their own* situation - and to make [political changes](#)<sup>1</sup>. An important developer of this form of education is [Paolo Freire](#). It played for instance a major role in the liberation theology in Brasil, in the struggle of ANC against apartheid in South Africa, development education in the Philipines, and in black and gender education in the North/West. This tradition developed the spirit in our workshops. It showed that education, that workshops *can* make a difference. This expressed itself in book-titles like "Training for Transformation", "Educating for a Change" and so on.

ZHABA's work builds on both traditions. The participative and interactive methods, targeted at change, at "taking your fate in your own hands" explain the success of the workshops developed within ZHABA, and before in the Organisation and Management Project of Milieukontakt Oost-Europa and other successful programmes in Central and Eastern Europe, like the Environmental Partnership for Central and Eastern Europe, the Organizing Project, and the Junior Fellowship Programme of the Regional Environmental Centre.

Working in this way, with workshops, proved to be a very effective tool.

- Nobody has experience with the process of political and economic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. Bringing all possible experience and knowledge together and building upon that is the only solution for such a situation. Relying only on so-called "experts" will definitely repeat the mistakes made in the past: the current developments are so complex, that no single expert will be able to have a sufficient overview of the problems. Education for Transformation even presumes that *no* social problem can be solved by experts alone. We need the expertise of "ordinary" people as much as abstract knowledge and systematisation.
- Working in workshops develops by its methodology social skills like delegation of work, co-operation in a team, effectiveness in team-work, conflict management, presentation skills; and furthermore self esteem (not on the basis of competition with others - but from the own value of each person involved), enthusiasm, creativity, motivation and group feeling. Many people have experienced that this forms the basis of effective social and environmental activism.

---

<sup>1</sup> "*Political changes*" means here "changes in the relations in society". This is something completely different than *party political*. It has as such nothing directly to do with parliament, with politicians, with parties. All environmental and social work can be considered to be *political* and still be done by *non-political* groups. *Non political* then means "not attached to the direct interests of a political party, faction or individual politician".



"In a workshop all are experts"  
studying the Learning Heads during a ZHABA facilitators training in Albania, 1994



One small warning: The word "workshop" is also sometimes used for an open discussion during a conference. We think it is OK to use the word "workshop" here. But it should be clear that "our" kind of workshops comprehends more than only an open discussion!



## Some differences with workshops

		<b>workshops</b>
<b>playing games</b>	<p>For fun.</p> <p>Activity for its own sake.</p>	<p>For fun <i>and</i> to learn.</p> <p>Part of the process in the workshop.</p>
<b>theatre</b>	<p>Main goals are artistic / entertainment.</p> <p>Mostly only the official players participate.</p> <p>No systematic analysis of what happens on- and off-stage.</p> <p>Quality is shown by performance.</p>	<p>Main goals are educational / action oriented.</p> <p>All participants take part.</p> <p>The process is systematically analysed and evaluated.</p> <p>The quality of performance is not important, important is the (educational) process.</p>
<b>lectures</b>	<p>One-way communication as main method.</p> <p>The lecturer is expert.</p> <p>Mainly to pass information; to some extend emotions.</p> <p>The room is ordered in a formal way: chairs in rows, lecturer, board, moderators in front.</p>	<p>Communication between all participants.</p> <p>All participants are seen as experts.</p> <p>To start action; to share information and experience</p> <p>The room is used to let the process go in an optimal way: circles or semi-circles, where everybody can see everybody.</p>

**conferences**

Formal setting.

Many participants represent officially an organisation or other structure.

Result oriented: the results have been prepared in advance.

Task oriented: the goals that are set by the organisers are the main guideline for the programme.

Works with mostly a large amount of participants (50 to thousands).

Informal setting.

Participants only on personal title (although they can come from a certain organisation).

Process oriented: the outcomes have to result from the process in the workshop.

Human oriented: the goals set by the organisers/facilitators are tools to improve the process.

Only suitable for workable groups: between 8 and 25; in rare cases up to 50.

**seminars**

Learning from experts and expert knowledge.

Use of conventional methods: lectures, working groups, literature study, etcetera.

Emphasis on relation between participant and contents of the seminar.

Learning from the knowledge and expertise of all participants.

Use of conventional and unconventional methods (games, role-plays).

Emphasis on the group process. Information is seen as a tool, not as a goal in itself.

**formal education**

Use of conventional methods.

Long time contact periods with students (between one week and several years).

Learning from experts and expert knowledge.

Use of conventional and unconventional methods.

Short time contact period with participants (between several hours and two weeks).

Learning from the knowledge and expertise of all participants.

