

The Instructional Skills Workshop: The Heart of an Educator Learning Community in British Columbia and Beyond



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ISSoTL Conference

Oct. 14 - 16, 2005

Vancouver, B.C.

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For over 25 years, the Instructional Skills Workshop program has been growing and spreading around the world. In its original home of British Columbia, it has been critically important as a network that connects graduate students, faculty and faculty developers from colleges, institutes and universities into one post-secondary educator learning community. As it has spread across the country (active in 7+ provinces), across the continent (active in 10+ US states), and across the world (active in 10+ countries), the community continues to grow—entirely on the strength of the program and volunteer spirit. This poster and associated handout describe the basic structure of the workshop and reports anecdotally on the participant experience with what some have called “a life changing workshop.”

“Wonderful PD & personal growth experience. It will continue to resonate across all the dimensions of my pedagogic & political & embodied self. Thanks.” (FDW participant).

The Workshops – An Overview

The Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) is a direct-experience workshop that includes micro-teaching, video, written, and direct feedback, designing lessons with achievable learning objectives, and other institutionally relevant topics. The basic elements of the peer-led, 24-hour workshop (3 or 4 days) have been tested for over 25 years. Thousands of participants report that it promotes positive, reflective teaching practices, improves teaching, and increases self-confidence. Some participants, having completed the ISW, decide to become ISW Facilitators. New facilitators are trained in a 5-day Facilitator Development Workshop (FDW) and become members of an extensive support network. During the training, new facilitators learn all aspects of promoting, organizing, and conducting the ISW in their home institutions. In addition to the electronic support network, facilitators have two opportunities every year to attend an **Institute** devoted to enhancing their ISW work, as well as personal and professional development.

“I would recommend this workshop to others because: it is revealing, it allows you to access where you are as a teacher, it gives you the tools to develop where you want to go—INTERACTIVE—COLLEAGUES” (ISW participant).

History

In the late 1970s as colleges and institutes expanded at a very rapid rate, educators in British Columbia (BC) recognized the need for some practical training for the many instructors being recruited to teach everything from welding to university-transfer biology. Douglas Kerr was contracted by Diane Morrison (BC Ministry of Advanced Education) to develop a short, practical, peer-led workshop that would provide participants with some instructional skills and a basic foundation in adult learning theory. The ISW spread quickly to many of the community colleges, technical institutes, trade colleges, art schools, hospitals, government agencies and other teaching and training organizations in BC. The ISW has continued to spread to many parts of the world (see Table 1).

Table 1: Where ISW has been offered.

Canada - Provinces & Territories	USA - States	Countries
British Columbia	California	Bangladesh
Alberta	Arizona	Chile
Saskatchewan	Utah	China – Mainland
Ontario	Washington	China – Hong Kong
Quebec	Florida	Finland
Newfoundland	Missouri	The Gambia
Yukon Territories	Michigan	Ghana
Northwest Territories	Iowa	Guam
	Nebraska	Guyana
	Connecticut	India
	Oregon	Kuwait
	Texas	Thailand
		United Arab Emirates
		Vietnam

History - Growing

In the early 1990s, universities in BC started to conduct the ISW and continue to offer the program, both as a stand-alone professional development activity and as part of certificate programs in teaching and learning for graduate students and faculty. Other Canadian universities have begun to adopt the ISW program over the past few years, with one or two new institutions beginning to offer the ISW every year.

The Institutes – Summer

For the past 25 years, the Summer Institute (June) has been held at a residential camp, Naramata Centre, in BC's Okanagan Valley. These 5-day institutes connect ISW facilitators from all over the world. Some of the innovations and derivative workshops that have developed from within the ISW network had their start here. Many workshops, programs and publications were also 'pilot-tested' with institute participants – providing the developers with high quality feedback on the product and on its potential professional development impact in their home institutions. Some of the multi-day workshops that are directly associated with the ISW are listed in Table 2.

The Summer Institutes often benefited from the expertise of resource people asked to guide a portion of the program. Some, like Bill Bergquist, were active with the Summer Institute for years (1981 to mid-1990s). Many others have focused the program on topical issues that enhanced the skills of the facilitators – skills the facilitators were able to take back to their home institutions. With apologies to those missed from the list of resource people who have contributed to the ISW learning community: Bruce Willats, Hattie Bishop, Ron Smith, Bill Read, JoAnne Kurfiss, Tim Scorer, Milton McLaren, Bob Aitkins, Gervase Bushe and many others.

<i>Table 2: Workshops Derived from the ISW Model</i>	
Workshop Name	Objectives (*ISW a prerequisite)
Facilitator Development Workshop	* To train new facilitators to offer the ISW at their own institutions.
Trainer Development Workshop	* To train new facilitator trainers, usually offered as an apprenticeship during the FDW.
Presentation Skills Workshop	To enhance the presentation skills of anyone needing to give presentations at meeting, conferences, symposia, etc.
Narrative Skills Workshop	To develop the skills and expertise be able to include narrative in the classroom.
Technology Mediated Teaching	* To develop the skill to use technology efficiently and effectively in the classroom.
Media Skills Workshop	* To develop the skills to produce appropriate and effective media for teaching.
Leading Discussions Workshop	To develop the skills to moderate discussions in meetings and the classroom.

The Institutes – Fall

Since the early 1980s, a 2-day Fall Institute (November) has been held close to Vancouver, BC, most often at a residential camp on Bowen Island. These institutes, led by ISW facilitators, are a blend of activities, with some designed to improve facilitation skills, others to develop new material, and others to strengthen the network. Many collaborative ventures that cross institutional lines have started here, either by the fireplace, while walking the labyrinth, or soaking in the hot tub.

In addition to the derivative workshops outlined in Table 2, many other resources have been developed by facilitators and shared at the institutes. For example, a new publication might be reviewed, leading to lively and extended discussion of its impact on teaching and learning and professional development (e.g., Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach*). Sometimes whole institutes have focused on the impact of new research on teaching and learning (e.g., brain-based learning), or recurring issues are examined (e.g., the most appropriate individual difference measure to assess learning style differences). Table 3 lists of some topics explored at the Summer and Fall Institutes, leading in many cases to the development of materials adopted/adapted by educational institutions, educational consultants, and government agencies.

"I love that there are no superstars just fabulous luminaries." "I love this gathering and its continued grounding and empowering influence on my practice and my life." (Fall Institute participants)

"I've been involved in the ISW for over two decades. I have learned more from this professional learning network than from any other professional involvement at any time in my career. Almost everything I do as a facilitator of learning has been deeply affected by the workshop itself and/or the people I've interacted with in doing the work." (ISW trainer).

<i>Table 3: Example Summer & Fall Institute Themes and Topics</i>	
Small Group Instructional Feedback	Cooperative Learning
Classroom Assessment Techniques	Brain-Based Learning
Gender & Diversity	Learning Styles
Reflective Practice	Group Formation & Processes
Multiple Intelligences	Appreciative Inquiry

The Future

From the beginning of the program, people have volunteered their time to create and maintain the ISW learning community. With Diane Morrison's continued guidance and support, representing first the BC Ministry of Advanced Education from 1978 to the mid-1990s, then representing the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer & Technology (C2T2), the network flourished. When C2T2 closed in 2004, the network and program activities became the responsibility of the Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) International Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee volunteers – some with support from their home institutions – have maintained the network and have embarked on ambitious plans to keep the program dynamic and the network growing. The Advisory Committee has initiated revisions of the ISW Participant Handbook, FDW Participant Handbook, and the Training Resources. Research has started to assess the impact of the ISW experience on classroom practice and on student success.

The Advisory Committee is committed to maintaining the community and the network. Working documents reveal some of the passion and drive shared by members of the community in their efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning in post-secondary institutions worldwide. Participant comments often recognize the vision and sense of community that has made the ISW Network a vital 'heart' of professional development in BC and beyond. The exciting future of this learning community is evident in the working definitions guiding the Advisory Committee: *"The Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) Network is an informally linked group of instructors, facilitators, and trainers who use the ISW model and processes to enhance student learning."* *"Our Vision: A vibrant community of colleagues engaged collaboratively in enhancing learning and teaching through participation in workshops, reflective practice, active research and teaching scholarship."*

Additional Information

The Basic ISW Elements:

The list below outlines some of the elements common to most workshops:

- Facilitators model a mini-lesson cycle while providing content (e.g., Learning Styles, Giving & Receiving Feedback, Collaborative Learning, Diversity, Active Learning, etc.).
- Participants and facilitators use a 6-part mini-lesson structure to design lessons.
- Usually 5 or 6 participants in a group with 1 or 2 facilitators. In some cases, 2 or more workshop groups run concurrently and combine for some activities.
- Usually conducted over 3 or 4 days (24 hours), in a variety of configurations.

- Facilitators assist learners with writing lesson plans, based on achievable learning objectives / expressive outcomes, across any of the learning domains.
- Each participant 'instructor' teaches 3 mini-lessons—each lesson is 10 minutes long (based on micro-teaching models).
- Participants are 'learners' in each other's lessons without role-playing.
- Participant 'learners' provide written, oral, and other forms of feedback to the instructor.
- Each lesson is video-taped and the video is a key element of the feedback.
- In addition to the ISW Handbook for Participants, many institutionally relevant resources are shared.

Conducting the Workshop: Training Needed

Facilitators of the ISW have completed a five-day Facilitator Development Workshop (FDW)—usually after completing an ISW as a participant. The FDW only trains participants to facilitate the ISW, with a focus on the mini-lesson cycles (managing feedback, lesson planning, writing learning objectives). During the FDW new facilitators conduct mini-lessons as instructors, facilitate other instructors as they deliver mini-lessons, and participate as learners. The additional layer of feedback to the new facilitators, under the guidance of the FDW trainers, provides a challenging and rewarding learning experience. Facilitators learn how to organize the ISW at their own institution, practice using all the necessary video equipment, and practice developing appropriate mini-workshops on learning styles, feedback, collaborative learning, dealing with diversity, and other topics as needed. A Facilitator's Handbook provides additional resources for the new facilitators. New facilitators are encouraged to 'team' with a more experienced facilitator for the first couple of workshops and to become members of a larger learning community of ISW Facilitators.

Some Comments from Participants on Summative Feedback Forms:

I would recommend this workshop to others because:

- it is a deep, rich experience not only in what one learns from others, but in what one learns about oneself.
- there is something for everyone to grow from
- great resources / great organization / practical / safe place to learn / constructive criticisms
- I would recommend this to others because of the exceedingly valuable lessons learned and the core group of like-minded colleagues met.
- it is a wonderful opportunity to expand approaches, knowledge, confidence and collegiality
- it is energizing, it is much more engaging//deeper than I anticipated
- absolutely without a doubt spread the word. This workshop has something for every level of experience. Critical for new faculty.
- it takes into account such a wide variety of learning & teaching situations and it is applicable to all instructors regardless of their career stage, discipline, etc.
- great way to develop/hone/refine skills that are very useful, practical, and important... The greatest part was learning from others.

A specific example of how this workshop will change the way I teach is:

I will plan to do less

I will plan to be more

I will plan & reflect & respect the scholarship of teaching.

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