

The 6Qs – optimal course design

Rich Parker takes a look at approaches in course design and offers a new tool that draws on lessons learned from across the aid and development sector

Training for humanitarian professionals around the world has experienced a meteoric rise in the past two decades. There are more international aid workers in the industry today than at any other point in history and their role in responding to disasters and emergencies is likely to only grow more complex. That means the demand for quality-based humanitarian training is paramount.

Training design for humanitarian face-to-face courses is rarely done in isolation. In almost all cases, there will be a group of decision brokers with an opinion to raise, a claim to stake; client organisations, general managers, donors, subject matter experts, consultants and even potential participants. Relations between a training specialist and the rest of this design group can be viewed along a linear continuum. At one end of the spectrum, he/she has full mandate to conduct design decisions on the group's behalf so long as their views are incorporated. At the other, different group members may assume the lead and the specialist's role is to influence, prompt and steer from behind.

Wherever the group sits on this continuum, as it comes together for the first time, the training practitioner will likely recognise familiar patterns within the dialogue. Discussion quickly strips down to business: what topics are new to humanitarian work? Who is available to deliver the course? What brand of exercise worked well in another project recently? Pretty soon, one of the group members is dividing up an agenda by session titles and a separate column is added for 'who does what'. All of these are important ingredients for the final dish, of course, but added before their time each can alter the flavour

dramatically. Or result in a perfect meal for the wrong set of tastebuds.

Caught in the whirlwind of this dialogue, one might be forgiven the feeling that such challenges are somehow unique to the project in hand. Far from it. Training design, like all aspects in the art of training management, is a collection of cold mechanics crafted together in a deliberate way, then brought alive at the appropriate moment for the participants.

Eight of the most common problems with humanitarian training course products are listed at Figure 1. All eight can be tracked back to →

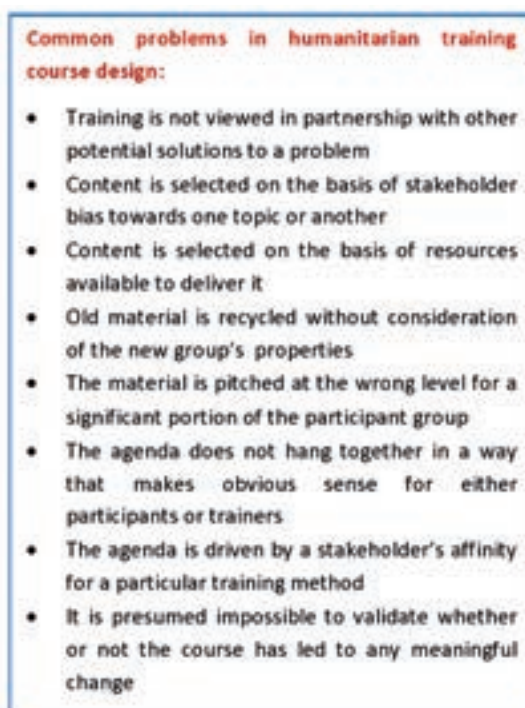


Fig 1

References

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- 2 R.L. Jacobs & B. Wang, *A Proposed Interpretation Of The ISO 10015 And Implications For HRD Theory And Research*. Ohio State University, United States, 2007
- 3 *Army Doctrine Publication Operations*. Ministry of Defence, United Kingdom, 2007

- 4 B. Hopkins, *Evaluating Training: A Systems Thinking Perspective*. <http://www.bryanhopkins.co.uk>. 2006
- 5 J. Good, *Designing Participatory Training*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) eCentre & Interworks, LLC. 2008
- 6 K.V Waller, *Writing Instructional Objectives*. NAACLS Board of Directors, United States. 2004
- 7 B.S Bloom, E.J. Furst, W.H Hill and D.R Krathwohl, *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals*. David McKay Company, United States, 1956

some form of bias, preconception or assumption borne from the previous exposure of one or more stakeholders during the design phase. Experience suggests the sooner the group establishes a common understanding of the *process in design*, the more efficiently it will navigate such landmines in its path.

But where should we turn for such a framework? A literature review in the field of aid sector course design has the feel of an architect looking for answers in a builder's toolkit; all of the contents have value given the right circumstances, none will lead to the perfect house for every new tenant. Organisational manuals abound with good ideas to deal with an array of specific issues. Yet, ask two practitioners – or so the old joke goes – to articulate their steps and you will likely receive three answers. Despite our self-proclaimed move towards professionalisation, as a community of humanitarian trainers we are unable to agree on a holistic approach that can be applied to any set of situational dynamics.

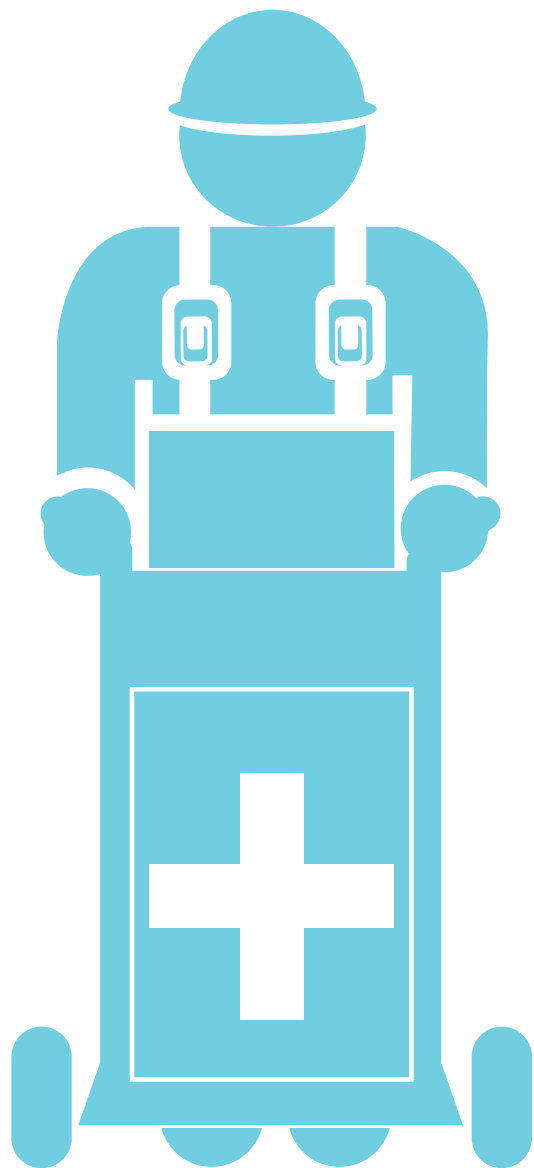
The training industry beyond the aid sector can offer a broader perspective. The *ISO 10015 Guidelines for Training*, for example, point towards a system's thinking perspective and contextualise design as one stage in the wider training cycle. For many, this certainly simplifies matters but what is gained in clarity may be lost in functionality. Trainers are left with comprehensive checklists; useful for verification of individual tasks, not so conducive to creative interpersonal dialogue².

In summary, we are in sore need of a new tool to guide us towards a more efficient and consistent design process for training our humanitarian responders; a tool simple enough for *groupthink*, yet one that allows dialogue to expand meaningfully on issues of particular concern.

The funnel approach

The concept of applying a sequential questions approach to complex design challenges is nothing new. Medics have fine-tuned this strategy for centuries in their triage of patients. The standard format for combat guides national military commanders through seven sequential questions to form the most appropriate plan for any given set of circumstances on the battlefield³. While such contexts are clearly far from similar, the underlying challenge of finding the best fit rings a familiar bell for all those regularly involved in training design.

The 6Qs tool uses the questions approach to capture both the distilled essence of training academia and the good practice of course designers working with United Nations,



international NGOs and government training bodies worldwide. It is built on many years of observation, reflection and discussion with some of the most skilled and sought-after humanitarian trainers in our sector.

The six questions themselves are linked on the principle of moving consciously from bigger picture factors down to specifics. Like a funnel feeding water into a drain, each question leads the user to the optimal set of design decisions while helping to avoid all of the dead ends and blind turns we commonly observe. Consider it a shortcut to reaching that tight-fitting final product, without all the stress and expense of having to rely on instinct, trial and error or historical accident.

Applying the tool

In its purest form the 6Qs tool provides a starting framework for structuring the dialogue between all those involved in the design. At the outset, it is recommended that the tool is shared in its entirety among the group and proposed as a guide for keeping the discussion on track. Stakeholders are reassured they will be invited to contribute their views at every stage in the process. The group then takes each question, *in sequence*, using whatever division of decision-making labour has been agreed.

In contrast to other design templates, the benefit of adopting the tool is the complete absence of prescription in content. The design group retains full autonomy to incorporate its preferred formats, techniques and resources into the outputs for each question. The tool is therefore equally valid when applied to any subject matter, in any organisation, for any group of participants. As well as for designing new learning events, the tool can be used equally effectively to review old ones.

Let's focus on a brief explanation of the rationale behind each question and the type of output it can deliver. The arrows leading through the entire system emphasise once again the cyclical nature of all processes. None of the steps are rigidly absolute and the first time user may discover that a decision at one stage will prompt a brief revisit to an earlier question. Experience suggests this does not necessarily indicate

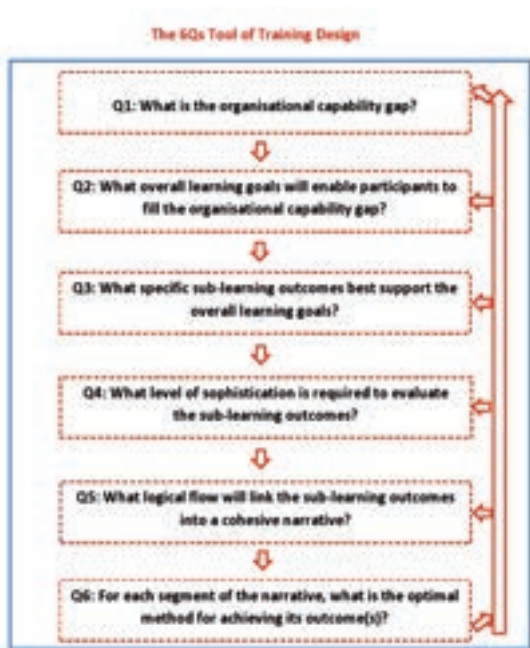


Fig 2

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an inherent problem with the framework, it can simply mean the group is fine-tuning the application of the tool for its own particular set of circumstances. *The ground moves under the feet of training* is a common enough sentiment for training practitioners; this is as true for the design phase as anywhere else⁴.

The 6Qs tool of training design

Q1: What is the organisational capability gap?

Q1 tells us that the first subject of need in the term 'training needs analysis' is the humanitarian organisation or community which the course will benefit. A face-to-face learning event can yield other benefits as a side-effect but at its heart, there is a collective performance issue and it is here that the design process truly begins⁵.

A capability gap can emerge over a prolonged period, of course, but in the fast-evolving aid sector, the call for action is often preceded by a trigger episode that highlights some change, either in the external landscape or within the organisation itself. A major security incident has happened, for example, or a new set of inter-agency guidelines has been released. In essence, a change that the organisation's workforce or associates are not fully equipped to deal with if no intervention is staged.

Consequently, if the design group is set on building a course that fundamentally tackles this gap, they must do so from a platform of intimately understanding the problem and, crucially, the problem's relationship with the organisation. In what ways is the organisation's role limited? How have the dynamics changed, and how are they likely to change in the future? Is the problem being addressed in other ways beyond the training course? There are many analysis tools available to help explore these aspects. All of them should allow the design group to summarise the capability gap as an output to this first step.

Q2: What overall learning goals will enable participants to fill the organisational capability gap?

Q2 leads us to consider the group of learners involved as the next step in the design process. In some contexts the individual participants may already be identified; in others, personnel will be nominated, selected or invited according to pre-designated criteria.

For the training course to fill the organisational capability gap, the design group must assess two things in relation to the performance problem: the level of competence participants start with (point A) and the level they need to reach (point B). Figure 3 illustrates how every aspect of course learning can be targeted at the zone between those two reference points. As a result, our thinking shifts from *input* to *output*; the design now is firmly anchored on participant necessities, not the biases of the design group.

Framing the capability gap as an absence of required competence is a useful exercise, but it can be awkward to communicate and even harder to act upon. By translating this into positive goals, the design group now has a basis for moving forward.

The desired end-state for Q2, therefore, is an articulation of the overall goal statement or, depending on academic preference, a set of global objectives⁶.

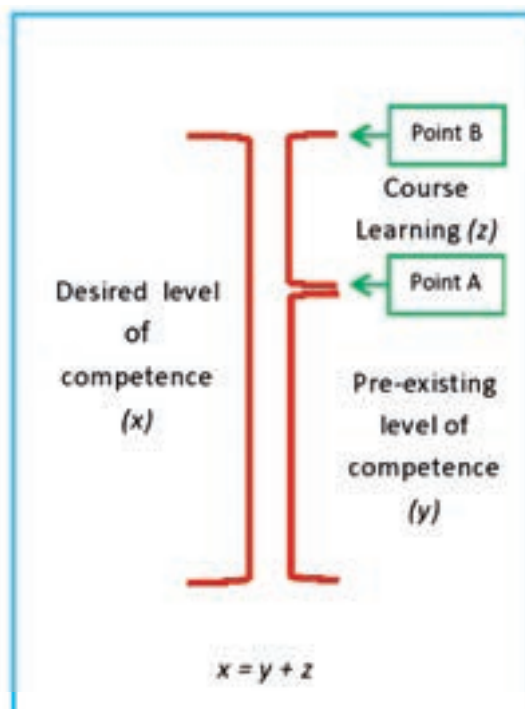


Fig 3

Q3: What specific sub-learning outcomes best support the overall learning goals?

Now there is agreement of what course learning would lift participants from their existing status to a point where they are able to fill the organisational need. Q3 asks us to break down the overall goals into their precise knowledge, skill or attitude components⁷.

The output is a list of sub-learning outcomes methodically worded in a comparable format. In many designs, this is where the hard miles are covered, with few short cuts along the way.

As a reward for its diligence? The design group can now be confident in matching the level of its course content to the participant learning needs assessed in Q2. The breadth and depth of each sub-learning outcome is checked and refined; collectively, they should total the desired change in end-state participant behaviour.

Q4: What level of sophistication is required to evaluate the sub-learning outcomes?

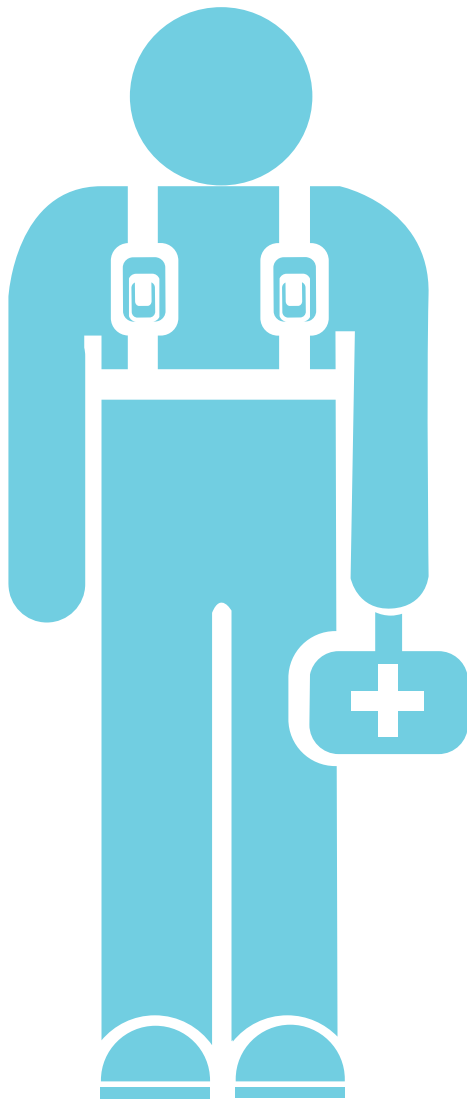
Another crucial advantage of clearly stated sub-learning outcomes is that they lend themselves to being measured either during, or after, the event. It is universally acknowledged that training evaluation considered as an afterthought does not work, hence its appearance midway through the 6Qs tool. Yet the sphere of training evaluation is often characterised as an unsolvable riddle, at least in the humanitarian sector, and there remains an ongoing divide in allegiances between Kirkpatrick's four levels and the Return On Investment Institute's five.

Before diving headlong into debate over methodological validity, however, the design group must first define what exactly needs to be evaluated and the extent to which it is *acceptable*, *necessary* and *worthwhile* to make that appraisal. Such a decision must be based on a conscious deliberation of all relevant stakeholders, including donors, and a tour of the options available. Only when the group has established the degree of evidence that is required, and for what purpose, is it in a position to select the most relevant techniques to achieve this.

The output of Q4 is an evaluation architecture for assessing a list of well-articulated sub-learning outcomes.

Q5: What logical flow will link the sub-learning outcomes into a cohesive narrative?

Q5 allows us to convert the output from the previous question into a unified programme or agenda. To reach that stage, the design group must first cluster the specified outcomes into



segments based on shared themes, then arrange the segments so they link together in a logical flow. Only then will these segments truly begin to resemble a storyline of mutually supportive sessions, modules or exercises.

The number of structural options for creating a logical flow is finite; it can be possible to blend two or more options, however the design group must select at least one. No overarching narrative means no cohesion to the course journey for trainers and participants alike. Q5 reminds us not to underestimate the learning power of a good storyline.

The output of this step is a carefully engineered course agenda or programme which allows appropriate time to meet each sub-learning outcome, while incorporating opportunities for reflection, absorption, learning checks and evaluation.

Q6: For each segment of the narrative, what is the optimal method for achieving its outcome(s)?

If the *6Qs Tool* has been followed in sequence, the design group has so far resisted the urge to make design decisions based on a consideration of training methods. Finally, the course agenda is in hand and the group can turn to the detailed planning for each session.

The key message to emphasise regarding Q6 is that for each cluster of sub-learning outcomes there are always multiple methods available to achieve it. The design group is well-placed to provide a range of alternative activities for each segment in the agenda. The delivery team can then select the best alternative for a given set of dynamics, namely:

- The participant group's learning preferences
- The stage of the experiential learning cycle at which the trainer wishes to insert the learners
- The trainer's own range of delivery styles and comfort levels with different methods
- The overall balance and complementarity with neighbouring sessions
- The physical resources available on-site.

The output for this final step, therefore, is a package of detailed session plans, with recommended methods that correlates directly to the course agenda.

Conclusion

General readers of this article might observe that the *6Qs* tool has evolved in a climate particular to the culture and style of the humanitarian aid industry. For newcomers, education in emergencies might seem poorly structured to cater for its own growth, and certainly less stringently regulated, when compared to parallel training fields in numerous private or public sector domains. Yet this also brings an opportunity for training specialists to add real impact, whether in designing specific projects or by influencing others through modelling good practice.

Moreover, it is likely that many of the design challenges discussed here will draw a wry smile of familiarity from the seasoned trainer, regardless of sectoral background, whose job it is to guide a group of diverse stakeholders towards a finalised training product.

At its core, efficient collective design seeks to navigate individual bias by pursuing a process built on agreed generic milestones set in logical sequence. The same hallmarks of quality underpinning the *6Qs* tool may equally apply to other spheres of face-to-face training and, with some minor adjustments to terminology, the tool might be usefully adapted for broader use throughout the training profession. **TJ**

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