

LOS ANGELES MISSION COLLEGE



Academic Excellence Workshop Manual

A Revised and Comprehensive Guide for Facilitators

Adapted from METAS Academic Excellence Workshop Handbook

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WHAT ARE ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE WORKSHOPS?

An Academic Excellence Workshop (AEW) is a small community of students working collaboratively to master course material with the guidance of a facilitator.

The facilitator for an AEW is trained to develop exercises that foster debate on key elements that have historically given students difficulty and impeded the learning process. As a result of this interaction the students gain both a sense of connectedness and the development of their own learning community.

As stated, an *AEW is designed as an enhancement and not a replacement for lecture*. The students are actively challenged each session to work as a group to solve problem sets. Within these sets are a number of challenge problems that are designed to foster debate on the tactics, procedures, and results of these difficult problems.

Depending on the situation and subject matter, these challenge problems should incorporate several concepts and whenever possible these problems should crossover. For example, if the focus of the AEW is on a Biology related topic – e.g. Genetics, a quick review of probability and Punnett squares should take place. The students should be asked to define important terms and give example problems of how they apply to solving various genetic applications/scenarios.

Because the workshop content is designed to reinforce and enhance the course work, the AEW Facilitator should work in conjunction with the faculty member to whose class the workshop is assigned.

The AEW facilitator meets regularly with the instructor to be sure that the worksheets developed are in line with what the class is learning and to be sure that their own knowledge of the material is complete. In essence the instructor becomes a mentor for the facilitator. The process is mutually beneficial. The facilitator by virtue of working closely with the students is able to inform the instructor of where the students are struggling--ensuring better service for all of the students in the class. Although it is hard on our egos, we often learn more from mistakes than we do from our successes. Few students will risk appearing incompetent in a group in which he/she feels excluded whether it is justified or not. Because the AEW consists of small groups with the students working closely together, the it quickly provides a safe and supportive environment.

Because the environment is a safe haven, students should try ideas and learn to speak the terminology. No matter what their level of mastery, all students must be engaged in the dialog. After speaking, technically *the student should then be asked to describe the process in plain English*.



STAR S = Stop; T = Think; A = Assess; R = Review*

What are the expectations when facilitating the AEW?

Evidence of a Successful Workshop

Learning Community

Students involved in the workshops should see the importance of developing a cluster of students to work with collaboratively. They will learn to form their own learning communities. In the workshop, successful academic strategies will be taught through group work in the context of a specific course; however, the student will be able to take these strategies and apply them to future learning communities and courses.

Behavior Modification

The AEW model puts the responsibility on the student. The students learn to become conscientious so that the tools and behaviors learned can be applied to future classes. The students learn to take academic chances, that is to say, that during the course of the workshop the student learn to voice questions or use the technical terminology. Speaking out in class has often been seen as a problem for many students. The fear of seeming inferior or of being laughed at often raises doubts in the student 's mind as to whether or not a question is a reasonable question to ask in class. Therefore, in small groups students engage in dialog where they are able to try out the terms and ask questions of peers that they are comfortable with. Eventually the student's confidence is built enough to take the risk of asking a question or voicing an opinion during lecture.

The AEW process forces an active learning process, rather than memorizing and passive reading. The premise that the workshop problems are to be solved through group effort requires the use of more challenging problems on the worksheets. Several advantages follow from this dynamic.

- Demanding problems elicit genuine debate about the principles and strategies required to solve them.
- AEW groups become used to attacking difficult problems and routinely solving them.

This helps to build their confidence so that they realize that they are capable of excellent work and demand it of themselves.



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What are the advantages of study groups?

Who is Involved in the Workshops? ~ *Key Staff*

The Faculty Liaison

The faculty member to whose course the AEW is assigned is designated as the faculty liaison for the course. The faculty liaison is important for sustaining the workshop. They work as resource person for the facilitators, providing reference material and guidance ensuring that the AEW is on pace with the class.

The faculty liaison agrees to meet weekly with the facilitator. For their cooperation, the participating faculty receive information from the facilitator about troublesome points and the guarantee of a student core who are keeping up with the material, working problems, and developing the self-confidence to participate actively in the class.

The Facilitator

The facilitators are students who have confronted the similar problems in the same classes and therefore, can provide unique insights. When trying to create a friendly environment a peer student is less intimidating. The facilitator's primary role is to make sure that the discussion is focused on the positive while at the same time ensuring that incorrect or unproductive procedures are recognized and eliminated. It is the facilitator's responsibility to develop worksheets that follow the workshop model and have problems that are sufficiently challenging. The facilitator should discuss and obtain approval of the worksheet during their weekly meeting with the assigned faculty.

During the course of the workshop, the facilitator does **not** directly answer a student's question. **Only** when several students are unable to resolve the question does the facilitator step in. The student should be asked a guiding question to help provide him/her greater insight. This is a great opportunity for the facilitator to suggest problem solving strategies and remind students that not all problems will be solved immediately. These questions should model the struggle with a problem. This type of questioning provides an objective analysis and should help to identify the parts of the problem that are understood and then to determine where the difficulty actually lies. These questions should not be judgmental. The facilitator must be careful to avoid this type of questioning. In order to do this, the facilitator needs to have a good grasp of the content, but must be able to understand the challenges of the material from the participants' perspective.

As a reminder, the AEW facilitator is **not expected to lecture or to re-teach**. The students are expected to have done the readings necessary to be prepared and have **at least** attempted the homework.



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What are the responsibilities of a facilitator?

How to Structure a Workshop ~ *The Key Elements*

NOTE - Although the structure of the workshop may vary slightly in order to keep student's attention, each workshop should have the same elements.

=>Start With a Quick Preview

The workshop should begin with a very brief student discussion about the concepts or rules that the workshop will focus on. Students should have done the reading and/or discussed it with the instructor beforehand. For example, if the focus of the AEW is on a Biology related topic – e.g. Genetics, a quick review of probability and Punnett squares should take place. The students should be asked to define important terms and give example problems of how they apply to solving various genetic applications/scenarios.

=>The Challenge Problems

After a quick review continue with a challenge problem to immediately foster dialogue among the participants. The challenge problems are critical to the success of the workshop; they force interactive participation. The problem should be sufficiently challenging that the students will need to debate how to approach the problem without becoming overly frustrated. Because the problem is difficult for everyone, no one loses respect for an unsuccessful attempt within the group. Simple problems tend to encourage the more skilled students to not take the AEW seriously and to sit back, relax, and zone out with a false sense of mastery; while those who struggle may not speak out on the simple problems because of feeling overshadowed.

Whenever possible, the problem should incorporate a number of concepts. However, in the situation where this is not possible, a very difficult one will suffice

=>Foundation Problems

The foundation problems should provide the background to solve the challenge problems. Depending on the type of challenge problem, the foundation problems may be the challenge problem broken up into simpler segments.

=>Review the Challenge

Now that the students have the foundation, it is important to go back and review the challenge problem and see if they are able to solve the problem or one very similar to it. At this point, there should be some real excitement generated in the workshop. It is also very important to note that if you have a very good workshop the students may be able to solve the challenge problem right in the beginning. If that is the case, then the facilitator should have a number of challenge problems on reserve to use.

Sample Time Frame for a Workshop

Quick Review	5-10 min
1 st Challenge	10-15 min
Foundation Problems	10-20 min
Review Challenge	5-10 min
2 nd Challenge	10-15 min
Foundation Problems	10-20 min
Review Challenge	5-10 min
Total Time	55-100 min



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Explain the best format for a successful AEW!

AEW FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Creating The Right Workshop Environment

The aim of the workshops is to support students' efforts to excel in their coursework by *focusing on their strengths, rather than their weaknesses*. Encouraging them is of major importance. The workshop material is aligned closely with the actual course but is *not a substitute for the course or a time to manage homework or provide another lecture to the students*. Honors, not remedial, work is the emphasis, but a place must be made to fill in gaps where needed. Thus, the workshop is a very complicated learning environment. Keep in mind that the following ideas intertwine to create the all-important workshop environment.

Focus on the Long Range Goals of the Workshops

Creating more sophisticated learning strategies that will assist the students beyond the workshop is the ultimate goal. Part of this is the teaching of good study habits, test-taking skills, and group study skills. If the environment is successful, the students will leave the workshop with the skills necessary to establish their own learning communities. As an example, students will form their own study groups for other classes and know how to question each other effectively and feel comfortable in doing so.

Create a Physical Environment Optimal for Collaborative Learning

The physical environment is not irrelevant to the effectiveness of the workshop. The optimal situation is an area equipped with tables and whiteboards or chalkboards that make it easier for collaborative work, with room between them for easy circulation. There should be plenty of writing utensils.

=>Creating Community

Set Up Expectations Early

Experience shows that setting explicit expectations and defining roles for students at the very beginning makes things much easier than later on. Discuss the nature of the workshop activities, the respect that should be present in student/student and student/facilitator interactions, student responsibilities, attendance, evaluation, and other policies or practices.

Build Trust Through Honesty

When a facilitator is able to show the workshop students that he or she really cares about their progress, a big step toward building trust is made. Truthful praise of student accomplishments is another such component. A facilitator should be on the lookout to catch students doing something well, but not giving unmerited praise. Maintaining proper confidentiality is also a mechanism for building and maintaining trust.

Develop a Social Environment

The workshop must have a social component, as well as an academic one. This makes it different from a class and more enjoyable for the participants. Initially, it may be very difficult to get the students into the thought process that the workshops utilize. Informality of the workshop procedures should be nurtured. Allow student conversations to stray away from the subject once in a while. Once the students become familiar with each other and become comfortable in the workshop, the social environment will automatically exist and flow.

Get to Know the Students

Obviously, some students need more encouragement than others and all students have different needs. This is the reason why the facilitator must get to know the students by showing a genuine interest in each student.

Deal with the Students as Individuals

During a workshop, a facilitator should take time to have a brief conference with each of the participants, to help understand the students' needs and situation. Additionally, temporarily

removing a student from the group may be necessary to create an environment in which she/he can speak freely.

Personal Information Can Be Exchanged to Create Study Groups

Although all personal information learned about the participants is confidential and should be discussed with others only as required to act on the student's behalf, it is acceptable for the facilitator to compile a phone/email list of the students in the workshop. When giving their numbers/emails, the students should indicate if they object to having their number/email circulated among the workshop. Then the list can be copied and distributed to each workshop participant. This helps students seek each other for assistance. **NOTE: Try this out after a few sessions have occurred. This can assure that the participants have become more familiar with each other.**

How to Deal with Student Problems

Remember, as a Facilitator you are not a counselor. You have every right to listen to the problems of the students, however, if the problem *is* serious and academic in nature it a good idea to direct the problem to a counselor. It's recommended to first talk to the counselor about the issue before you bring the student in, this may avoid any unnecessary embarrassment on the student's behalf. That being said, you are creating a relationship with these students and it is natural listen to their affairs. Be conscientious and sincere.

=>Fostering Communication

Ask, Rather Than Answer Questions

As a force of habit, it is common that when students do not know the answer to a problem, to ask for the answer. *Avoid the temptation to answer immediately*, these students are here to learn problem solving techniques and you are not helping them by giving away the answer. When asked a question, return with another that pushes them in the right direction. It is worth saying that this method might initially infuriate some students, be cautious and helpful in your responses. Remember that this method is intended to provoke student interaction. Connect previously discussed content in your response. Simplify problems and reword them to allow the student a chance to answer the question.

Circulate Throughout the Workshop

A facilitator will try not to spend a significant amount of time with one individual or group unless it is necessary. Circulating allows the facilitator to get an overall view of the workshop that may identify problems. Remember, it may occasionally be necessary to take an individual off to the side to work with him/her personally but intense work with one student should probably be arranged to occur outside the workshop time. Also, circulating gives the facilitator

exposure to the maximum number of students. Most of the time it is beneficial to keep a low profile when moving among the students. This forces the students who are not near the facilitator to seek assistance from another student.

Sit with Students when Helping Them Individually

When working with a student, sit *next* to her/him. This satisfies two goals. First, it allows for the facilitators to keep a low profile. Also, when assisting students, sitting with them prevents feelings of being looked down upon. This gets to the students' level and creates a nonthreatening environment.

Have a Positive and Optimistic Attitude

There is a difference between a positive attitude and an optimistic attitude. The former is necessary to a non-threatening environment. For example, it is not appropriate to shame a student. The fear of appearing ignorant will significantly interfere with the students' learning process. Search for positives in students' work and behavior and praise them for it. An optimistic attitude is a positive one. But, it carries much further. If the facilitator is an optimist, a student can constantly be encouraged and challenged, for example, "If you want a good grade, then strive for it" or "It is a difficult problem, but you have the tools to solve it."

The Shy or the Aggressive Student

The facilitator may need to take an active role to integrate a shy student into the workshop. If he/she understands a concept, refer other students to him/her. On the other hand, the aggressive student should be managed carefully, too. If the student is a heckler, he/she may need to be reminded of the expectation of respect in the workshop.

Being Aware of Student Opinions and Thoughts

The facilitator should take advantage of all opportunities to obtain the students' ideas and opinions about the workshop and worksheets. This can be accomplished by listening or by asking questions throughout the semester. These techniques are a supplement to the formal evaluation forms.



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Explain the best environment, physical and academic, for a successful AEW?

Content of Workshops

Reminder of Workshop Content / Study Habits

Remember that the workshops are *not a time for lecturing*. The beginning of the workshop is ideal for presenting an example problem, clearing up misconceptions, or helping students review the material. Also, the facilitator may need to prompt the students to summarize concepts, to explain short cuts, or to introduce alternate techniques. Otherwise, a majority of workshop time should be spent on the worksheets. *The workshops are also ideal for exposing students to efficient study habits and test-taking skills*. Many students are not aware of the various techniques associated with studying: e.g., knowing when to move to a new problem when at an impasse on the current one, or knowing not to rely excessively on answer keys or textbook examples. Also, emphasize the important techniques of integrating individual and group study by example in workshop activities

Stretching the Students' Capabilities

Worksheet problems should be designed to stretch the student's capabilities and to make them think. By challenging the students in this manner, the facilitator can stretch their capabilities without alienating them with problems that are too difficult. On the worksheets, consider listing the sections covered, so student can refer to the text later.

Solutions to the Worksheet

Solutions to all worksheets should be supplied to the students at some point. The facilitator may find it most convenient to hand them out during the meeting following the respective workshop while the material is still fresh in the students' minds. Don't postpone handing out the solutions until just prior to an exam--the students get little to no use out of them at this time.



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Explain how you would incorporate strategies to incorporate study skills in AEWs?

Description Of Duties Outside Of Workshop

Organizing and Preparing Material

In collaboration with faculty, the facilitator is responsible for organizing and preparing worksheets or other activities for the workshops. A short list of resources to help the facilitator create problems and activities is other students, faculty, textbooks, past collections of worksheets, or old exams.

Meeting with the faculty

The facilitator maintains regular communication with the course instructor whose course has been selected as the primary target of the workshop. This assists the facilitator in developing relevant problems and materials for maximizing the effectiveness of the worksheets. Also, the instructor can indicate the areas with which the class is having difficulty, sections that may be emphasized at exam time, and areas that were not sufficiently addressed in class because of time restraints. These meetings are also valuable to the instructor, who gains exposure and insight into the program.

Using Evaluation Forms

Evaluation forms should be given to the students at an identified time during the term to obtain their anonymous input about the workshops. This can be done at mid-term and/or at the end of the term.



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Explain how you would prepare the material for the AEW! How do you assess the effectiveness of you AEWs?

Facilitator and Student Contracts

Facilitator

As the workshop facilitator, I agree to provide the following:

- I will provide a positive and collaborative environment.
- I will attempt to keep all students engaged and involved in the workshop.
- I will be prepared for each meeting. I will have reviewed course material and will have solved all the problems on the worksheets provided.
- All worksheet problems will be relevant and appropriate.
- I will meet weekly with the course instructor and will have developed the worksheets in conjunction with the instructor.

Student

As a student in the workshop I understand and agree to the following:

- I will not speak negatively of others and will do my best to work collaboratively.
- When I am able, I will assist other students in the workshop to understand the material.
- I will come prepared to the workshop having at least attempted my readings and homework.
- The workshops are a working environment and that I will not be able to simply get answers.
- I understand that the facilitator does not teach or lecture in the workshop.
- Outside of the workshop, I will meet with the course instructor on homework issues.
- I understand that specific homework problems will not be done in the workshops.
- I understand that I will be asked to leave a workshop if I am disruptive or continually unprepared.

Signature

Date

Course

Resources

Links to help with study skills:

[Growth mindset](#)

[How do I learn best?](#)

[How to study for science courses?](#)

[Self-regulated learning](#)

[Study smart](#)

[Guidebook for studying and learning in STEM](#)