



SDN Participant's Information Kit

Welcome to a Social Developers Network (SDN) Workshop

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1. Aim of an SDN Workshop

The aim of an SDN workshop is to provide an experience of community and an atmosphere of optimism and renewal for people looking to create a better world. The workshop offers an experience of community, safety, acceptance, sharing, reflection and renewal. It is a lived-in experience, an exploration of ideas at people's learning edges, with opportunities for personal and collective challenge.

Ned Icton, one of the founders, said of SDN workshops:

The focus of SDN workshops is the balance between the personal, the group's 'family spirit', and the wider 'all-of-society'. SDN has established a culture of effective support and a core of experienced members – wherein lies the true wealth of our network. We create a culture of support and fairness, honesty and insight.

SDN workshops may challenge views about ourselves and the world. This is because SDN is not just a feel-good experience – it strives to be real and relevant, on a personal and social level, for those engaging actively and sincerely in the issues of our times. Beyond this, the SDN culture is one of mutual appreciation and energising group wholeness.

Content is not the main point. It's about how we can form an emotionally powerful support community over a short period of days. My observation of this process in workshops held since 1975 always confirms my faith in the constructive potential in humanity, in contrast to the opposite that the media focus on.

Michael Maher, a long-term SDN member, describes the workshop:

The point of an SDN workshop is not why people come and what their agenda is, but what they discover about themselves and others, behind the defences. It is about discovering the human in each participant. The structure is designed to bring forth that human element - why we encourage emotion rather than see it as a lack of control. We seek relationship with the real person behind the facade, which is what most participants discover, often to their amazement, by the end of the workshop.

2. Outline of SDN Workshops

SDN workshops run for three or four days. The annual workshop currently runs for four days and five nights. Everyone is strongly encouraged to arrive the afternoon before the first day, so that accommodation and food matters can be resolved, and in evening, we can hold the introduction session.

Typically, we divide the workshop time into 1.5 hour sessions: two in the morning, two in the afternoon and one in the evening. Sometimes, a session can be split into two, where a presenter prefers a smaller time period, or wants to combine with another presenter – we are flexible with session arrangements.

Unstructured time is always scheduled, for example a group excursion to visit some of the interesting natural attractions in the local area. Such events provide for some of the most memorable interactions - there's nothing like a good open air walk to come to know the feelings of our companions!

a. Introductions

SDN Agreement

An 'agreement' has been constructed over the years, which provides the underlying behaviour guidelines both personal and inter-personal. It is sent to all attendees prior to the event and is read out at the beginning of each workshop.

Creative Listening

First session of an SDN workshop is what we have called 'Creative Listening'. During this session, each attendee is provided about five minutes to introduce and say a little about themselves, without any questions or interruptions from the group. The 'listeners' sit silently in a creative, receptive mood, offering respect to each speaker to introduce themselves in their own way.

b. Sessions

Session Allocation

The second session of the workshop is where we allocate time-slots to everyone who would like to present a session. All participants are invited to present any topic they feel strongly enough about to share with the group, although there is no obligation. Sessions are interactive, so although the presenter introduces their topic, and 'owns' the session, the group is encouraged to offer their views and engage with the topic from their own perspectives. This means that a lot of the burden of sustaining a topic for a whole session is considerably lightened, as usually other participants have plenty to say on any topic!

After every attendee is offered one session, if any time-slots remain unfilled, people can ask for a second session.

Session topics

SDN workshops are open to all reasonably acceptable topics. They can be personal or public, secular or religious, pragmatic or mystical, creative or cognitive, emotional or abstract, local or global, current issues or ancient, physically dynamic or passive. A presenter is free to ask assistance from anyone else, who may be able to help the session unfold effectively.

SDN has a long tradition of trying to balance the 'micro' with the 'macro', and the emotional with the dispassionate. A good workshop tends to offer each of these in balance. Where highly emotional feelings arise, we also provide a subsequent time to review how people felt in the session. There have been times when that review was so important, extra time had to be found to offer people the space to talk through their experience.

If you have a topic you are keen to share with the group, it is a good idea to prepare the concepts, structure and any props or resources you wish to include, before coming to the workshop. To assist with this, we send around a document that offers ideas on how to prepare for speaking on your subject.

Session structure

The structure of a session is open to variation. Normally the group will sit in a circle with the presenter one of the circle. Or you can split up the full group into smaller sub-groups, separate the physical locations of these sub-groups, change locations and bring the full group back together at the end, and so on.

If audio-visual resources are required, wherever possible we will have screens and projectors available. The group then forms a circle around the presenter and the screen. When no screens are required, we always attempt to meet in the full circle to avoid the feeling of being at a conference, as the principle of equality between all participants is nourished to create a high degree of trust, upon which the success of the workshop rests.

Session behaviour

Where some attendees feel no inhibition in speaking forth, while others are reserved, reticent or lack confidence, it can be a problem. There are no rules of engagement, but there is a general requirement to be sensitive in providing encouragement towards all members of the group to have space to participate.

Over the years, many structural techniques have been suggested and tried, but in the end, it is up to everyone individually to notice, reach out to, and include others. Remember, some people's voices have more density and volume, but everyone in the workshop should be heard.

Participants are encouraged to speak up at the time, instead of 'sitting on their feelings'. The atmosphere of respect for individual views and feelings creates a supportive environment for voicing our thoughts, (no matter that these may not have been properly formulated in our mind first).

The SDN has no political or moral agenda, aside from mutual respect for differences in beliefs and attitudes. Thus, the SDN does not undertake any form of partisan activism – its value is precisely this, in that it is a free and open space for everyone to meet in equality and acceptance. Interacting face-to-face over the time of the workshop is one of the keys to its success.

Sessions have the potential to press emotional or belief 'buttons' among participants, and when this happens the personal crises evoked are always given priority and sensitive attention. Private assistance to help resolve or share these issues can be freely requested from more experienced members.

It is not mandatory to attend all sessions; however, participation is encouraged so that as many approaches to any topic as possible can be considered. It would be appreciated if your intention to be absent were communicated to someone before the session, so that no time is spent waiting, and we can proceed knowing you are okay. If there is any particular session you feel uncomfortable about, you are under no obligation to attend, so long as we know.

c. Workshop structure

There is no hierarchy at an SDN workshop. We do have someone who is assigned the role of attending to all the logistical requirements, and this person can be referred to where practical problems arise. This person will occasionally make 'housekeeping' announcements.

We also have at least two veteran workshop attendees, who through their experience can help guide the process if required. Due to the open structure of a workshop, there is a degree of unpredictability and uncertainty, so having some veterans to advise and assist in smoothing the processes is valuable.

Everyone is encouraged to help in the food preparation, washing-up, chair and table arrangements, cleaning, and all such housekeeping tasks. Some of the best relationships are formed between washing-up helpers and cooks! The mood of the workshop is greatly improved when everyone adopts a willingness to help in these tasks.

3. Meals

The organisers will purchase all necessary food for breakfast and lunch, but we require a number of evening meals to be pre-prepared or cooked on-site by attendees who volunteer for this (expenses will be reimbursed). All attendees are asked prior to the workshop if they could provide an evening meal. It is important that anyone bringing food for the workshop notify the organisers, so we don't buy too much food.

It is quite acceptable to bring items of your own food, for your own consumption. All special food requirements (eg vegetarian, gluten-free, additive-free) in principle should be self-provided. If you do have such requirements, contact the organisers as often cooks can modify or offer variations on their meal, and purchases can take these into account if possible.

Breakfast and lunch require helpers to set out the food, so please pitch in wherever you see a need. On occasion, and depending where the venue is, we might eat out one night at a local pub or restaurant if not too expensive. This is self-funded, and will be advised if available per workshop.

4. Equipment and Resources

We aim to provide the following equipment which you may use for your presentation or during breaks and relaxation time:

- Whiteboard and butchers paper (plus board pens, tape, blue tack, etc).
- A digital projector may be provided when possible, but if you have an Apple/Mac laptop, please bring your own adaptor to connect with the projector. DVDs, CDs or USBs can be

played if devices are available. These could include some music to play between sessions, in free time or as background during meals.

- A connection to the internet is usually available, although not always. Please check with organisers before relying on this as venue capabilities may vary.

There will be a resources table and a noticeboard so if you would like to bring leaflets, flyers, posters, diagrams, etc. to go with your talk, or to provide useful information, or raise interesting topics, please do so.

5. Travel

Let us know how you are travelling from a long distance and if you are interested in sharing the travelling with other participants. This starts the conviviality and we can introduce you to each other if you are travelling from the same area. We will send you instructions on how to get to the venue by car or public transport.

6. What to bring

Details on bedding and showering may vary with different venues so we will let you know prior to the workshop. Bring your own personal and medical supplies as we may be out of town for several days. Clothing is casual and relaxed, and we want you to feel comfortable and at home.

7. Fee payments and expense reimbursements

Advice on how to pay the deposit and balance of the workshop fee will be circulated prior to the workshop. Keep all dockets for any purchases made on behalf of the workshop, and present to the workshop treasurer for reimbursement.

More resources are available on the SDN website - <http://sdn.ned.org.au/>