# Surfacing Assumptions

- **Encourages reflection**
- **Builds flexible ways of thinking**
- **Enables creation of alternatives**

*What are typical assumptions that your learners are likely to hold about your training context or industry practice?*

*In what ways do these assumptions limit people in their thinking and practice?*

## What is this activity?

This activity asks people following a discussion or learning activity to **pause, stand back and reflect about** the assumptions that they might be bringing. These might be in the form of a statement, theory, a question, a deeply held value or common practice.

Assumptions might be difficult to name at first and some examples might need to be given in your context. Naming assumptions doesn't mean that they are wrong; rather they are worthwhile examining – making the tacit more visible. Once the practice is established for asking for assumptions it becomes a lot easier for the learners. They are able to develop far more nuanced understandings and new ways to frame or value what has been tacit.
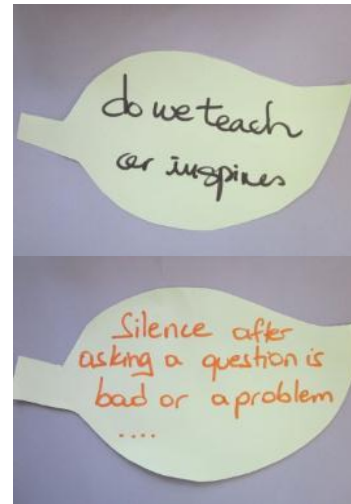
**Instructions to learners:**

1. Pause, stand back, reflect
2. Write an assumption you are making on a leaf-shaped cut-out
3. Put it into the assumption box
4. Select an assumption from the box
5. Write a statement that is an opposite. How could you make the opposite work for you?
6. What new insights do you have?

In the Tools for Learning Design (TLD) project, we introduced an "assumption box" to collect the assumptions and later in another activity asked people to take an assumption from the box that they believed in and try reversing it.

*What is an opposite that is true?*
*How could you make this statement work for you?*
*What new insights do you now have?*

It is useful to compare with others what assumptions they have and what deeper values or unquestioned habits are behind them.



**An example of turning assumptions around**

*Assumption:* Different learners have diverse needs.

*Write a statement that means an opposite:* Homogenous learners have common needs to learn a particular skill.

*How could you make this statement work for you?* While I can facilitate them in learning and skill, I can draw from them their individual needs/motivation.

*What interesting thoughts have you gained from this exercise?*

- We have to be ready to face different sets of learners and make learning more meaningful for them.
- Every learner has the same needs to be loved and to love
- So love and we will be loved
- Assumption breaking is a simple and effective way to get new ideas and insights

## Why a box and cut-out shapes?

We used the assumption box as a metaphor for what we keep hidden. It represents the tacit part of our practice. We often might make visible a particular assumption and then put it back in the box. The cut-out leaves represent something that is organic and also represents change – that we can turn over a new leaf.

Having a memorable cut-out shape that we write on for different purposes, helps us to visually track the sort of thinking we have been doing. For example, we might use leaves for surfacing assumptions and clouds to check-in on what we are thinking now about the process. These can be stuck on walls or posters.
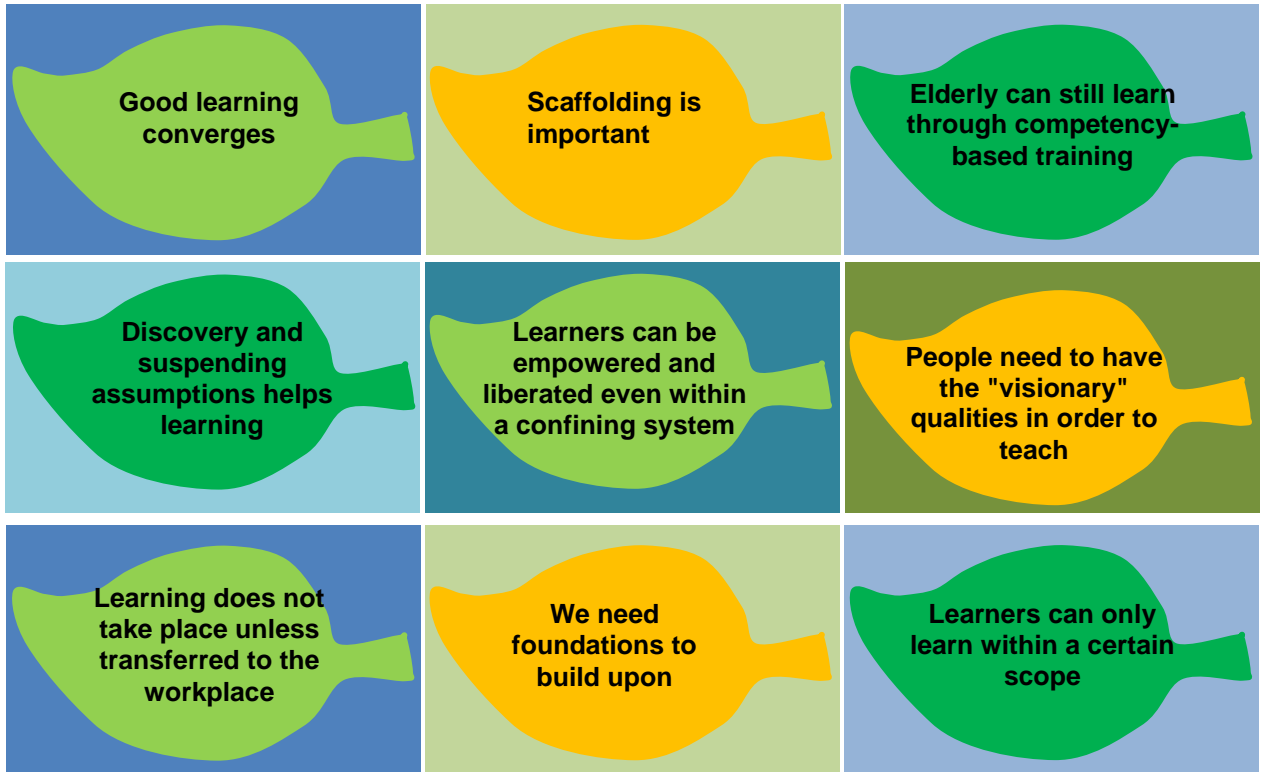
## Prepare some assumptions

If you know your learners and context well you may already be aware of many assumptions, or cultural expectations that you would like to make more visible. You can get the thinking started by writing quotations or statements on leaves for your learners to consider.

**Example:** *What assumptions do we make about teaching and learning?*

As part of the TLD project, teachers unveiled a number of assumptions about teaching and learning. Here are some of them:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Good learning converges | Scaffolding is important | Elderly can still learn through competency-based training |
| Discovery and suspending assumptions helps learning | Learners can be empowered and liberated even within a confining system | People need to have the "visionary" qualities in order to teach |
| Learning does not take place unless transferred to the workplace | We need foundations to build upon | Learners can only learn within a certain scope |

# Acknowledgements & Background

This resource was put together by Dr Sue Stack (pictured, top) based on activities she developed with Dr Helen Bound (bottom) and Renee Tan for workshops for the Tool for Learning Design project and The "Who" of Teaching workshop. Thanks to all the participants of the Tools for Learning Design project and participants of The "Who" of Teaching workshop who provide examples for this activity.

This and other content related to the Tools for Learning Design project can be found on the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website, a resource for trainers, curriculum and learning designers, and training leaders in the Singapore Continuing Education and Training sector interested in deepening understanding of their practice to create innovative and enlivening possibilities for their adult learners.

The Tools for Re-imagining Learning website and the Tools for Learning Design project overview can be found at www.ial.edu.sg.

For more information on the Tools for Learning Design project or the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website (content), please email Dr Stack at susan.stack@utas.edu.au or Dr Bound at helen_bound@ial.edu.sg.

We welcome questions or feedback on this publication, the Tools for Learning Design research report or the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website (layout or technical issues). Please email research@ial.edu.sg.

### *About the Institute for Adult Learning*

The Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) aims to contribute to the competitiveness of Singapore by developing an effective, innovative and responsive Continuing Education and Training (CET) sector that is able to meet the needs of industries and the workforce. It achieves this by raising capabilities, catalysing innovation, and leading research in workforce learning.

### *About the Centre for Research in Learning*

The Centre for Research in Learning (CRIL) undertakes research that seeks to understand and develop the processes and practices of learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum design in the CET sector from multiple perspectives, settings and contexts. We work with those taking part in research projects, engaging practitioners in the research process and thereby developing communities of practitioner researchers.