

Engaging Your Audience: Practical Tips for Presenting

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Many of us have been in lectures where someone is asleep during the presentation. There is something about the lull of the voice, the low lights and the passivity of a didactic presentation that sets the stage for someone to nod-off. As the presenter, it can be disquieting and potentially disruptive. As a member of the audience, we smile knowingly for most of us have been there, or nearly there, at some point in time. For the individual involved, the amount of learning is limited, at best.

It has become increasingly recognized that one-way lectures are of limited use in the adult learning context. A variety of educational strategies have been developed and trialed, and a few have been validated as more effective in engaging participants and, presumably, increasing content learned from a presentation.

To facilitate an interactive session, it is important to invite the audience to participate. Making it clear that questions are encouraged, and the input of the audience is valued, sets the stage for a collaborative presentation. “What do you think?” or “How would you manage this?” can be useful prompts and can be adapted to most talks.

Perhaps one of the simplest and yet effective techniques is to present a case at the beginning, and then pose related question(s) to the audience or ask what questions arise from the case. Ideally, these should be issues which require in-depth knowledge, prompt complex clinical decision-making or are controversial. This cues the audience as to what will be covered in the presentation. The questions can be re-addressed periodically throughout the talk. Content expertise is also important, and preparation is necessary to ensure mastery of the background knowledge.

Education experts suggest a number of relatively simple strategies to improve interactivity in large group settings. For example, the use of an Audience Response System (ARS) has been used effectively. Preplanned questions can prompt the audience to focus on key content elements and then present the “answer” with discussion after the content has been delivered. There are several online ARS systems that can be accessed easily. Through this technique, a teaching pearl of “say what you are going to say, say it and then say what you have said” (from McKeachie’s Teaching Tips) can be carried out in a meaningful way.

When lacking technology, a “show of hands” can work to get a sense of audience knowledge or attitudes – assuming that there is a sufficient level of trust within the group or the questions are low risk. Alternatively, strategies such as “think-pair-share” can be done effectively by a skilled presenter. A question is posed, and audience members are asked to reflect individually, then discuss responses with the person sitting adjacent. Selected members of the audience can be called upon or volunteer to share their dyad’s thoughts with the larger group. A variation on this theme can be undertaken by posing a question to the audience and then asking them to commit to an answer in writing - assuming they have pen and paper in hand (Known as the one-minute reply or one-minute paper technique).

Teaching through group interaction or by discussion can be challenging. One must plan for the unexpected, but participation often increases the rewards for the presenter and improves the experience for the audience.

Two great references to check out include:

- “McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research and Theory for College and University Teachers” by William McKeachie (Houghton, Mifflin Company)
- “A Practical Guide for Medical Teachers” edited by John Dent and Ronald Harden (Elsevier Churchill Livingstone)

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