

Interactive presentations

Why vary your style?

Adult learners have many different approaches to learning. We therefore need to vary our presenting method in order to ensure that we get our point across and that we have successfully transmitted whatever information, skills etc. we want to.

Adult learning styles: Adults learn by doing, by thinking, by contributing, by sharing, by exploring, etc. They do not do so well in a situation where they are receiving a top-down lecture from a senior expert. This does not mean that they cannot benefit from such expertise but it needs to be transmitted to them differently. Because so many of us on the international conference circuit are lecturers by profession and used to a certain classroom format, changing the way of delivering our expertise can be quite a challenge. And yet, this is what we need to do if we are to be successful conference presenters.

Facilitating Vs presenting

As a general rule, the presenter should not speak for longer than 20 minutes at a time. This could be repeated twice (at beginning and end for example) but it should be respected. No adult learner can listen to someone or several presenters talk for an hour or an hour and a half. With the best will in the world and even if the presenter is an excellent speaker nobody can listen that long. For the whole session to be valuable as a learning tool for those present, it needs to be varied and it needs to contain some level of interactivity. Incidentally, this makes for a much livelier session for the presenter also.

Why make it interactive?

When a session becomes interactive the presenter becomes more of a *facilitator* than a *presenter*. Rather than *presenting* their expertise, he or she *facilitates* the learning process.

One advantage to making your session interactive is that this is a sure fire way to engage your audience and make them feel that the session is about them and the knowledge you can transmit to them or help them learn rather than it being about you. We all listen and learn better when we feel that the material being delivered is of direct relevance to us.

Another point is that, most adults learn better when they have had time to think things through for themselves. Through interactive moments during the presentation you can set aside time for them to do this which means they will actually learn more even if you speak less than if you spoke for the full length of the session.

In a typical classroom or lecture hall situation with students, we check whether they have understood what we have tried to transmit to them through exams, continuous assessment, etc.

With adults and peers the only way we can do this is through feedback from them. The best way to get that feedback is through interactivity during the session itself.

Another reason for making your session interactive is that not only do we all have our own teaching style, we also all have our own learning style. By varying the activities during the session you will ensure that you cater to all learning styles. There are many different ways of describing the four main learning styles. Broadly speaking they can be divided into:

Activists (they will enjoy a multitude of hands-on approaches during the session)

Theroists (they will enjoy the presentation part of the session most)

Experimentalists (they will enjoy exercises during the session where they can apply what they have just learnt or been asked to think about)

Reflectives (they like to think before they speak, they will never jump in with questions. They will enjoy smaller group work type activities where they can think things through with other participants.)

(It goes without saying that nobody is limited to one learning style, we all use different ways to learn. The categories above reflect the dominant tendency for a given individual but do not exclude other learning approaches used by that individual.)

When organizing a session with adult professionals your audience wants to feel that the learning process is between peers and that they are contributing to that process. By introducing interactivity into your session, you enable the sharing of ideas and analysis between equals, guided by you. Finding a balance between transmitting your expertise/knowledge and facilitating such exchanges between peers is what will make for a successful learning experience for all concerned.

The sky's the limit in terms of coming up with ideas for encouraging interactivity. The essential thing is to ensure that you have set aside adequate time for anything you organize. This includes time to explain what the exercise consists of, to divide people into groups (if this is what you are doing), give them time to work on the issue together, get and give feedback, conclude.

Examples of useful session techniques you can use: case studies; role plays; simulations; Games

Start by:

doing a brainstorm activity i.e. What makes a good/bad dean; return to this at some point in your session to give feedback and explore ideas raised by participants.

asking closed-ended questions which call for a show of hands or a simple yes/no answer.

showing a demo rather than explaining with words. Ask them to analyze it (or paper, video etc.), i.e. drawbacks and advantages of method by group work or role play in favor or against.

presenting the topic subject as a problem that needs to be solved. Arrange group work asking participants to solve it. Or get your audience to write down in one sentence how they would deal with it. Come back to their solutions perhaps toward the end of the session to check that their suggestions have been included/analyzed.

asking them to write down the best/worst experience they had in X job or dealing with X problem.

doing a short quiz on technical terms (if relevant) i.e. what does x mean? These should require short one to two word answers. It should never put anyone on the spot. It can be done simply by the audience calling out word answers, yes, no etc. Such a technique allows you to ensure that everyone has the basic terms/ideas needed to follow the session.

Other ideas to make your session interactive include using case studies, role plays, ice-breakers, calling for reporters from the groups, moving people around through group formation, getting them to post GW findings on walls, on flip charts etc.

All of these activities will create energy and break the monotony of the 1 or 2 day conference where delegates spend the majority of their time sitting immobile on a chair and/or behind a desk.