



LEARNING TECHNIQUES

THE YELLOW BOOK

LEARNING METHODS

Most conferences feature an excessive number of presentations, which leads to participants being overly passive. Here are nine techniques for involving conference delegates in the proceedings so they can learn from each other.

It's generally not a good idea to have people sitting in rows for hours on end listening to lectures. Nowadays people who attend meetings and conferences are well-educated and experienced knowledge workers bursting with initiative and energy. The days when an expert with a PowerPoint presentation or a Director with an announcement could demand everyone's attention during wall-to-wall lectures are almost over. Today, the delegates often represent as much expertise as the speakers on the podium.

Dull meetings do not achieve anything. People must have an opportunity to contribute. They attend meetings and conferences because they want to talk about their interests. They want to network with all their interesting fellow workers in the field who are also attending the conference. They want to swap experiences and make useful contacts. And they want to enjoy themselves. The organisers must help the delegates achieve all of this. A few simple techniques can go far towards energising an otherwise predictable conference.

HOW DO WE LEARN?

For the last fifty years all educational research has shown that lectures and presentations are among the least effective learning methods. So those who organise meetings should think twice before they fill their programmes with lecturers because "This will bring them in!"

The fact is that all learning depends on having the time and opportunity to interpret and digest what one has heard.

Anything new must have a bearing on our own world, on our own projects, and on what we ourselves consider to be important and interesting. Lectures that rush past in a pack never stick, and are a waste of time and resources. A good meeting and an effective conference will ensure that there are adequate periods for digestion and processing, where delegates alone or in pairs, in small groups or large, can assess how they will be able to exploit the input which has been served up to them, within their own professional activity. This requires careful planning on the part of the organisers.

The new techniques which are presented in this leaflet are easy to use, and some of them will only take up 5-10 minutes of a conference's time. They bring people together, get everyone to join in, and invite reflection and learning about the topics of the meeting. They are all based on the following:

Three principles for training conferences:

1. Lectures must be few in number and to the point.
2. Delegates' knowledge must be exploited.
3. Delegates must meet and learn from each other.

MEET PEOPLE

WHAT : Delegates shake hands and exchange a few words.

PURPOSE : Creates a little warmth and trust in the room.

WHEN : May be used in any gathering where people are meeting for the first time

REASON : Before a conference starts many people will sit themselves quietly on a chair and wait to be entertained. Meeting a few strangers is the first step towards making contacts, networking and forging partnerships. Delegates should also greet each other at smaller meetings. What follows is an alternative to the more formal round of presentations where most people “overdress” in order to impress.

HOW : After his welcome the chairman will say:

“Please take five minutes to introduce yourselves to the 3 or 4 people sitting closest to you.” Or to groups with a maximum of 20-30 people: “Please get up and introduce yourself to some people you don’t know. Go ahead, you have ten minutes”.

SPLIT A LECTURE IN TWO

- WHAT :** An hour's lecture can be broken down into two or three sections.
- PURPOSE :** To let in air and have a change of pace.
- WHEN :** When you have a lecturer who is a bit dull or a PowerPoint presentation with 40 slides.
- REASON :** Research shows that you cannot concentrate on a technical lecture for more than 20-40 minutes. You need to stop and ask *"Why is this interesting?"* and *"What has it got to do with me?"*
- WHEN :** Ask the lecturer in advance to take a break or two during his lecture to provide an opportunity for reflection in the hall. Any lecturer will be happy to do this. If necessary take the time from the question-and-answer session at the end. After all, if people have been reflecting during the course of the lecture there will not be the same need for questions at the end.
- NOTE :** Use the break to get people to brainstorm (see page 6) or write down their ideas on paper in silence (see page 11). Don't let the audience ask complicated questions or start a drawn-out discussion until the lecturer has finished his or her lecture.

PAIR AND SHARE

WHAT : Delegates discuss with a neighbour for 5-10 minutes about a topic which has just been dealt with during the session.

PURPOSE : To give people an opportunity to digest a presentation and comment on it – preferably with their neighbour, which is safe.

WHEN : As a break during or after a presentation. Also appropriate in the middle of a lengthy discussion in larger groups, when not everyone has been able to have their say. All you need is a neighbour, so it works with both 4 and 4000 people.

REASON : It is essential that any presentation should have a bearing on what the individual is doing in his or her work. Otherwise it will just be an irrelevant briefing, which does not stick. Besides, listening to someone else's interpretation of what has been said will prompt new ideas. Thus we learn not only from the person giving a presentation but also from our neighbours. This also reduces the need to ask questions during the session afterwards – since the pressure will have been taken off people.

- HOW :
1. The moderator will say to the delegates: *“Now turn to one of your neighbours and tell each other what you think about the points which have been raised during the lecture – how individually you can use what has been said. Spend five minutes on this.*
 2. When time is up the moderator will ask for people’s attention and continue with the business of the day – or take a few comments from individual delegates (see *“Plucking”* on page 14).

VARIATIONS : People can be asked to talk about something specific: *“Identify something in the presentation that was particularly interesting”,* or *“Speak about something in your work or organisation that the lecture inspired you to look at in a new way”*. Later ask people to talk to the other side.

LUNCH WITH DUCT TAPE

WHAT : A buffet lunch at which people are sent off to the four corners of the room to talk to strangers.

PURPOSE : To create a dynamic exchange between people.

WHEN : At lunchtime during the conference.

REASON : After a long morning people do not need to sit down to feast for an hour. Seated you only have 2-3 people to speak to. There will often be a need for something more dynamic, where people can meet and mingle for personal and professional reasons.

- HOW :**
1. Serve a simple and light buffet with very small plates and food that can be eaten standing up, with a fork but no knife.
 2. Use duct tape to divide up an area in the venue, not too far from the buffet, into squares on the floor, each side measuring 2-2.5 metres, where 5-8 people can stand –close to each other.
 3. Put a table, ideally a high coffee table, in each square, so people have somewhere to put their glasses. Don't put it in the middle of the square – that would inhibit circulation.
 4. Give each square a number, e.g. by hanging an A4 sheet of paper from the table.
 5. With 80 delegates there can be ten squares with eight people in each, for example. So prepare eight slips with the number "1", eight with "2" and so on.

6. Before people are sent to lunch, have the moderator introduce it: *“Today’s lunch will be a buffet and a little more interactive than usual. As you leave, you will be given a number at random. This is the group you will be eating with. Make sure you meet and chat to all of the people in your group. The plates are deliberately small; this is to facilitate short conversations between your colleagues where you chat, then leave to refill your plate at the buffet and then return and find someone new in the group to chat to. I hope you meet some interesting people. We shall meet again at one o’clock this afternoon”.*

STARTING AFTER LUNCH

WHAT : Anything but a lecture.

PURPOSE : To prevent people from falling asleep – and instead ensure that they have energy for the afternoon’s programme.

WHEN : > Serve coffee immediately after lunch, rather than leaving it till 3 o’clock.

- HOW :**
- > Get off to a lively start. Get people involved. Have a session lasting about half an hour with a Pair and Share (see page 6) or ask questions like “*What did you think of this morning’s presentation?*”, or “*What is your own experience of our topic?*”
 - > If the delegates did not know each other well beforehand, you can let them have an opportunity to meet each other. Say “*Stand up and greet a dozen or so people you don’t know. You have half an hour. I shall come round and move you on if you stay too long.*”. The moderator will then play the part of hostess and help people move on to the next person.
 - > Have people work in groups of two or three. This is so demanding that no-one will doze off. If there are more in the group, involvement will diminish and the need for sleep become more urgent.
 - > If a presentation is to be given, the moderator will have to monitor energy in the room carefully. Interrupt the presentation after 20 minutes if fresh air is needed in the venue. Have people talk to their neighbour, or ask delegates to get up and stretch their legs if they want to. Just identify the problem – it isn’t painful, everyone knows.
 - > Get people out on to the floor for a short spell of leg bends and stretching to get the blood circulating.

SILENT PAPER REFLECTION

WHAT : A short break in the full session, in which every delegate reflects and writes points down on a piece of paper.

PURPOSE : Have people take note of what is important just for them, from either the lecture or based on discussions from the full session.

WHEN : During or after a lecture, or in the middle of a complicated discussion, or whenever a pause for thought is needed.

REASON : There is seldom enough space or quiet for systematic reflection during a conference. People are as a rule pleased to have an opportunity to reflect on what is essential for them based on the thoughts, ideas and discussions from the session. In your head, your ideas may pile up and block each other, but when you externalise them on a piece of paper, one after the other, room opens up for new ideas. This makes for clarity and perspective.

HOW : The lecturer will say: *Now we shall have just three minutes of silence, during which I should like to ask you to consider what I have said and how this affects your own practice. – What inspires you? What seems useful to you? etc. – and if want to, jot down a few notes.*

GROUP LEADERS

WHAT : For group activities, a moderator will be nominated and given written instructions.

PURPOSE : To keep group discussions on the right track.

WHEN : When the delegates are sent out in teams.
If people are sent out in groups with a specific task or to discuss a topic, discussions can easily be sidetracked.

HOW : Before people are sent out in groups, they will be told from the rostrum that they must appoint a moderator, to keep the discussions in focus. The group will have a sheet of paper bearing 4-5 of the instructions below (don't make things too complicated):

1. The group must choose a moderator who will keep track of time and the topic in focus.
2. The subject for discussion will be described in a single sentence, a question if appropriate.
3. If necessary use the first five minutes to think about the topic in silence and note down points on a piece of paper.
4. In larger groups you will be able to warm up by talking with a neighbour for five minutes.
5. If necessary have a session in the group in which everyone has the opportunity to say what they think very briefly.

6. The moderator will open the discussion by asking what experiences, points of view, ideas or suggestions delegates have for a topic. If necessary ask people to avoid assessing or commenting on anything which others in the group have said previously.
7. Then choose a couple of those topics and present them for discussion one at a time.
8. The moderator will discreetly ensure that no-one talks too much, that everyone has the opportunity to contribute and that the discussion stays on track.
9. The moderator helps sum up the discussion along the way.
10. If needed, the moderator ensures that whatever the groups has decided is formulated and written down by someone.
11. A finishing time must be identified before people are sent out in their groups.

NOTE : The instruction to the moderator must be short and to the point, with no more than 4-5 points.

PLUCKING

WHAT : After working in groups everyone will gather in full session and the moderator will only hear from those who are burning to say something. The best will be “plucked,” like the strings on the violin.

To avoid extensive and boring summaries on group discussions and ensure that feedback is relevant and interesting.

WHEN : If there are more than 3-4 groups and it is not very important to get comprehensive summaries from every group.

REASON : It is a classic error in group activity for the moderator subsequently to ask for summaries from each group in full session. Regardless of the topic, after 4-5 groups it becomes incredibly dull, because the rapporteurs will either faithfully serve up all of the group's nine points or merely repeat the lowest common denominators rather than the creative ideas and interesting points of view of individual people. Unfortunately, the moderator must keep on until the bitter end, or the last six groups will feel cheated.

- HOW :
1. Before the delegates are sent off in groups the chairman can say that it will not be necessary to take notes of the group's discussion.
 2. When the groups have returned to full session the leader of the meeting will ask: *"Who has something to share from their group discussion which could inspire the rest of us?"*
 3. So you pick out the ones who come forward and look most interesting. In that way you get the most inspiring and committed reports. You can stop when the energy dips, typically after 5-12 presentations. No-one is done an injustice because we did not reach their group because everything proceeds in an unsystematic fashion. We get to hear from a broad spectrum of people who actually have something interesting to say, and it is often this that we want to hear after a group activity – not a comprehensive report.

RECEPTION WITH JOINT EVALUATION

- WHAT :** A final reception at which people are encouraged to discuss the conference.
- PURPOSE :** To make the reception lively and interactive.
- WHEN :** When a conference concludes with a reception, e.g. at 4 o'clock in the afternoon
- REASON :** Most people will go home instead, partly because sitting still for so long has drained them of energy and partly because it is not easy to go a reception, for who is there to talk to?
Receptions should be bubbling occasions, where people circulate and enjoy themselves with the people they have met at the conference and meet other exciting new people.
- HOW :** Send people out to cocktail tables, where they must stand with four other people they do not know and answer a brief questionnaire placed on the table. The questionnaire asks people to discuss the day's presentations with each other, what they will be taking home with them, insights they have had during the course of the day, etc.
The essential thing is not that the organisers get this information, even if that is the pretext, but that people are given a reason to go to the reception at all and enter into conversation with other people there.
After quarter of an hour the chairman of the meeting can ring a bell and announce that people are now free to circulate.

With support from the Ministry of Economics and Business eight leading Danish conference businesses and selected knowledge centres joined forces in the project “Future Meeting Concepts”.

The project’s objective is to rethink and redraw the contours of one of the niches in the conference market of the future:”The learning meeting”. The conclusion is that a learning meeting has five main ingredients:

- > **DIALOGUE** between organiser and venue about the conference’s objectives and expected results, with the venue sharing responsibility for conference content.
- > **PARTICIPATION** for all delegates, so that the meeting’s own resources are exploited to the full.
- > **DESIGN** of the conference’s parameters, so that the shape and function of the area supports the learning process and creativity.
- > **DIGITISATION** of knowledge and resources, so the conference has an effective “search engine” for learning and innovation.
- > **DRAMATISATION** of conference content and its processes, so the conference raises and motivates the delegates’ commitment.

The eight companies involved in the project are: Comwell a-s, DGI-byen, Hilton Copenhagen Airport, Hotel Legoland, Hotel Nyborg Strand, Odense Congress Center, Radisson SAS Hotels & Resorts and Øksnehallen.

The knowledge centres taking part are Learning Lab Denmark, Kunstakademiets Arkitektskole, Meeting Professionals International and Wonderful Copenhagen and Danmarks Turistråd (the Danish Tourist Board), which have created a joint secretariat for the project.

This publication covers the topic of PARTICIPATION and describes new techniques that help conference delegates become active and learn from each other. The publication is authored by Ib Ravn and Nina Tange of Learning Lab Denmark.