



This article was inspired by an idea submitted by Tony Ellis, CAE

POINT-COUNTERPOINT

Interactive vs. lecture-style learning

Joan: I see a great value in peer-to-peer learning, what we too often call “networking.” People come to meetings to learn from and with each other.

David: But peer learning isn’t always the goal. Speakers and presenters usually have more information and knowledge. That’s why people want to listen to them. I think participation should be voluntary, not forced. Many people just want to sit and listen and remain anonymous.

Joan: Well, they don’t have to be called on! In good interactive learning, small group discussions are safe and allow those who want to participate the time to do so. In the training and facilitation I do, norms are set at the beginning, explaining that participation is voluntary.

David: Even so, sometimes group discussions force participation. The group is so small that not participating makes a person stand out. Others in the group may try to draw them out. I like to participate. I have a lot of experience and I like to share it and hear others. But, sometimes, I want to hear an expert. I don’t have to participate all the time.

Joan: I don’t think we are that far apart in what we believe. I think that we need options at meetings for different kinds of learners and presenters. One has to look at the audience needs, styles, learning facilitator style, room set, etc. I’m an aural learner and generally cannot sit in a lecture session. I would love to see smaller sessions after a larger general session where the topic could be addressed by specialists in the field.

David: That’s a good idea. Association Forum [of Chicagoland] often does that, with keynoters leading smaller group discussions. Other ways to improve general sessions: greater use of video, lavalier mikes, speakers staying away from the



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podium, multiple podia (as props), so there is a freer feeling, but it is still not threatening to people who like traditional formats. Also, rooms that aren’t box shaped. Tiered seating is good. A different environment will evoke a different feeling.

Joan: Yes, and that gets us to the problem with facilities who don’t “get it” regarding education and room sets. Associations need to think more about what will make a meeting successful when they do a site inspection and contract for a meeting. They need to ask a hotel or conference center to set rooms differently to see what it feels like.

David: Back to the speaker or leader. That, more than anything, determines people’s satisfaction with a session. Speakers

should be knowledgeable, charismatic, and audience driven.

Joan: How we respond to a speaker or leader is based on our learning styles.

David: Too many speakers are boring. They read, they turn to look at the screen. They may know their stuff, but you don’t want to learn from them. So, we also need to coach speakers more or try to do a better job of recruiting speakers.

Joan: Or, when subject matter experts know their stuff but cannot deliver it to different audiences, we can design sessions so that a good moderator interviews the experts instead.

David: Whatever the meeting format, it should be denoted in the program, such as “highly interactive.” But meeting planners who like interactive sessions shouldn’t assume they are always the best way.

Joan: Or vice versa. Once, at a meeting, a session said it was to be interactive, but the room was set theatre style and so I didn’t even go in!

David: Some people would have reacted like you did if it was set up with round tables.

Joan: I know. Or worse. If it were Open Space they would have freaked out and walked far away!

David: That’s why a meeting should offer both options, so everybody has a format they are comfortable in.