

Effective Teachers Engage Learners: Tips to Making Your Teaching Interactive When Working with Groups of More Than Twelve

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The most effective teachers employ a variety of strategies to actively engage learners in learning. While it is relatively easy to engage learners when working with small groups (ie, less than 12 people), larger groups are more challenging.

There are three core principles of adult learning that should guide teaching of adults.

- Learners seek solutions to problems they recognize they have. Undergraduate and resident physicians will pay most attention to information that they perceive will be relevant to their success as 'students' or that they visualize will be helpful to them as future practitioners. Similarly practicing physicians will seek out sessions that address the clinical problems they are experiencing or anticipate will come their way.
- Learners want to be involved in their own learning. Adults are less interested in learning new facts. They come wanting an opportunity to reflect on what is taught, try out new approaches, and validate new ideas with trusted peers and teachers.
- Adult learners have many demands on their time. Adults are spouses, parents, breadwinners, and volunteers who try to juggle many activities in addition to their role as students, residents and life long continuous learners. Instructors must present a quantity of information appropriate to the time available to teach it and show the range of ways problems can be solved using the new skill and knowledge.

We present a few tips that you might incorporate into your teaching to stimulate your learners and ensure their involvement in the session.

Organize Your Material. All presentations should consist of three parts. The introduction should present the learners with an overview of the objectives or intent of the presentation along with information about why these are important. The body of the lecture should be designed so that the important aspects are covered in an accurate, logical, cohesive and interesting manner. The order of your presentation should match the order of the objectives. The conclusion or summary should review the major concepts presented.

"Need to know information' should take priority over 'nice to know information' particularly if the concepts are complex or very new to the learner. In the case of complex information, it is better to allow sufficient time for active participation rather than more information. Attention spans wax and wane over time and what is learned first and last is retained best.

Reinforce Your Content. Audiovisual materials, such as slides, overheads, videos and handouts, add variety to the presentation and allow for both visual as well as auditory learning.

Cases and stories can be helpful to illustrate points. They will drive a point home, clarify a topic under discussion, and help people relate better to an issue. They can be helpful in assisting learners to grasp complex ideas. Examples that are relevant to previous experiences and the knowledge base of the learner can help them to identify and connect in a concrete way with the material being taught.

Provide Opportunities for Interaction with Other Learners and the Teacher. There are many ways to promote interaction within a session. Breaking the groups down into dyads or triads to solve problems or discuss the relevance of a new approach or idea can be effective. Learners can be asked to participate in simulations or role playing to act out a part. Obtaining a show of hands or using a series of coloured cards to respond to questions will also engage learners. Brainstorming sessions enable learners to test out possible answers.

Use Questions. Question and answer periods can be useful but they should be used throughout the session, not left to the end when time is short and the learners are beginning to think about their next activity. Questions allow both the teacher and the learner to elicit feedback about performance. When using questions, be sure to allow enough time for participants to formulate answers and respond in an organized way.

Create a Positive Climate for Learning. As teacher it is important to project an attitude of acceptance and sensitivity. The ease with which teachers conduct themselves, their willingness to receive and answer questions, and responsiveness demonstrated toward an audience set the tone for a friendly warm and receptive atmosphere for learning. If you exhibit self-confidence and self-respect the learner will feel comfortable confident and secure. On the other hand if you belittle the learner or their experiences, they will not withdraw from the group and shut down as learners.

Be Enthusiastic. Teachers who are invested in the material will excite the learner to identify with the subject at hand. Vary the quality and pitch of your voice, use a variety of gestures and facial expressions, change position if necessary to make direct and frequent eye contact with everyone in the group and demonstrate an ardent interest in the topic to attract and fascinate an audience. An energetic attitude is contagious and enticing.

Give Positive Reinforcement. Acknowledging ideas, actions and opinions of others by using words of praise or approval, such as 'that's a good answer' or 'you have a good point' or using nonverbal expressions of acceptance, such as smiling or nodding encourage learners to participate more readily or try harder to improve their performance.

Serve as a Role Model. Creative teachers will seek new information by keeping abreast of current research, theories and issues in clinical practice. Expanding one's own knowledge base gives credence to what is taught and gains the confidence of learners in the teacher's expertise. A commitment to lifelong learning transmits an important value to others of their need for continuous personal or professional development. Teachers are seen as credible role models when they are actively engaged in scholarly activities, are

experienced in the field and have advanced credentials to teach complex skills. The believability of a role model is greatly affected by the values displayed and the congruence demonstrated between what a teacher says and does.

Repetition and Pacing. Repetition needs to be used with discretion. It reinforces learning by aiding in the retention of information. It can however lead to boredom and frustration because you are repeating what is already understood and remembered.

Summarize Important Points. Summarizing information at the completion of the teaching-learning encounter gives a perspective on what has been covered, how it relates to objectives and what you expect the learner to have achieved. It also reviews key ideas to instill information in the mind and helps the learner to see parts as a whole. Closure should be used at the end of one lesson before proceeding to a new topic. It provides feedback as to the progress made, thereby leaving the learner with a feeling of satisfaction with what has been covered.

Have Fun. Whether you are teaching undergraduate medical students, residents or practicing physicians, create an experience for them that is enjoyable for you. Think about your messages and how you can most effectively meet your learner's needs at their level in a way that builds on their wealth of prior experiences and knowledge.

Further Reading

Slotnick HB, How Doctors Learn: The Role of Clinical Problems across the Medical School-to Practice Continuum, Acad Med 1996; 71(1):28-34.

Bastable SB, Nurse as Educator: Principles of Teaching and Learning. Sudbury MA; Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 1997

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