Education Strategies: Session Formats That Go Beyond the Lecture

Make It Interactive

Audience Engagement

Goodbye microphone runners, hello bring your own device (BYOD). Companies like Crowd Mics are turning the attendee's own smartphones into microphones, encouraging interaction with the audience. Mobile apps can feature polling, surveys and question collection to increase the level of attendee engagement. Tools like sli.do help crowd-source questions to get audience insights on important questions. Second screen technology allows attendees to access additional content and interact through their own devices through slidesharing and Q&A platforms.

Debate

An effective way to present opposing views about a topic. One structure for a debate is to have a moderator and two, two-person teams. The debate begins with the moderator stating a position. Each team member has a fixed amount of time (e.g., 10 minutes) to present arguments. Time for rebuttal can be incorporated into the session and/or a discussant can sum up the main points of the session.

Fishbowl
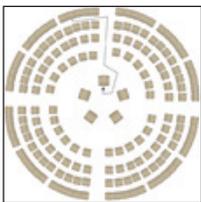
A form of dialogue that can be used when discussing topics within large groups. The advantage of fishbowl is that it allows the entire group to participate in a conversation. The moderator introduces the topic and the participants start discussing. The audience outside the fishbowl listens in on the discussion. After a set amount of time the participants in the fishbowl may change.

Gallery Walk

Attendees explore multiple texts or images that are placed around the room. Because this strategy requires the attendees to physically move around the room, it can be especially engaging.

Game Show

Two teams go head-to-head to answer the questions asked by a moderator. This style session can ignite enthusiasm and competition amongst the participants.

Graphic Facilitation

Visual Scribing involves an artist stationed in the session room taking notes on a large piece of foamcore board, using images and text to create a story about the session at hand. Display in the hallway throughout the rest of the event and save the image in a digital format to share with attendees after the event.

Lecturette

The trainer/facilitator presents. This format has low involvement from the participants, but provides data and foundational material in an organized fashion that may be needed to tee up a learning exercise or activity.

Mock Trial

Using extroverted members of the organization as the players, the mock trial sets up the audience as the jury and presents sensitive issues like ethics or business etiquette in a fun way. An industry lawyer serving as the judge can lend perspective to the case at hand.

SmackDown/Fast & Furious

Participants have two minutes to introduce themselves and share an idea or technique. A timer to keep people on track and a panel of judges can declare a winner at the end of the session to add competition. Speed learning sessions are similar concepts that focus on one-on-one interactions.

Virtual Conference

Like face-to-face conferences, the main features that draw audiences to events are the educational presentations and booths on the expo floor. Virtual conferences offer the convenience of your desktop without the inconvenience or cost of travel. Can be done via live stream (in cases like keynote speakers) or webinar format (sharing the presentation material and audio from the session). ▶

Make It Relevant

Birds of a Feather (BOF) Sessions
These sessions are often done over lunch, where you group together based on some kind of shared interest, without a pre-planned agenda. Subjects can be tied to Special Interest Groups set up within the association.

JAM Sessions/Quick Hits
A shared interest group gathers after a day of sessions with a facilitator who guides them to share what they learned during the day. The sharing session is captured and disseminated to the attendees.

Meet-the-Expert Discussions
Subject matter experts of note are on hand during the session as an informal panel that is open to questions from the floor. The more the attendees are able to drive the conversation and get real answers from the experts, the more successful.

Case Studies
Attendees provide presentation material on their own challenges and outcomes.

Demonstrations & Learning Labs
The presenter prepares for hands-on learning in the classroom. This may include bringing in software and computers for each attendee to work with, getting out of the classroom and into a real work environment, or role playing activities.

Contests
The attendees are divided into groups and tasked with an exercise based around solution building. Participants use their expertise to solve the dilemma. At the end of the session the product of each group is presented and a winner may be voted on with a pre-determined prize to help spur creativity and results.

Make It Flexible

Open Space

An approach for hosting meetings, conferences, corporate-style retreats, and community summit events, focused on a specific and important purpose or task — but beginning without any formal agenda, beyond the overall purpose or theme.

Unconferences
The agenda is created by the attendees at the beginning of the meeting. Anyone who wants to initiate a discussion on a topic can claim a time and a space. These sessions often feature open discussions rather than having a single speaker at the front of the room giving a talk, although any format is permitted.

Make It Short

Ignite
Participants are given five minutes to speak about their ideas and personal or professional passions, accompanied by 20 slides. Each slide is displayed for 15 seconds, and slides are automatically advanced. The Ignite format is similar to Pecha Kucha, which features 20 slides displayed for 20 seconds each. The presentations are meant to "ignite" the audience on a subject, to generate awareness and stimulate thought and action on the subjects presented.

Lightning talk
A 30 – 90 minute speaking slot is arranged with several talks one after the other during the session. The length of talks are usually between 1 and 10 minutes with a 5 minute limit being common. In order to allow for rapid changes between speakers, slides may either be discouraged or a single computer running a presentation program may be used by all speakers.

TED-Style Talks

Based on the popular TED conferences, a speaker delivers a presentation on an idea or passion for up to 18 minutes. There may not be much structure around what the speaker is asked to present on.

Speaker Showcases
Like TED talks, book 3-4 speakers to present for 15-20 minutes each and then feature each in a follow-up breakout session. Attendees can choose which speaker resonated with them the most and join that speaker for an in-depth session.