The 10 Most Important Lessons I’ve Learned About Effective Classroom Presentation
by Bob Pike

1. Use the dynamics of the group.

Today’s adult learner is different from the adult learner of 30 years ago. As a result, we no longer can overwhelm people with our effective presentation style.

Look at how the world of entertainment has changed. We can flip through the 68 channels of our local cable television system, then look at each other, and say, “There’s nothing on.” We can wander up and down the aisles of a video store, past 5,000 title, and after 15 minutes we still can’t find anything to watch on a Friday night. Now, this is the adult learner you’ve got sitting in front of you. There is nothing you can do to match the kind of attention-getting entertainment that’s available today. The only viable option I see is using the participant’s own energy.

That means involving the participant, not talking to them. I don’t know of anyone who’s looking for a good talker. When was the last time any of us had 15 spare minutes and said, “I wish I had someone to listen to”? More often, we’re looking for somebody who’s willing to listen to us. So the very first thing I suggest is that we teach more by covering less. There are many things we talk about during classroom presentations that could be better shared in other ways. Reference manuals for instance. Or if I’m teaching needs assessment, I don’t need to lecture on The Ten Ways to Assess Needs. I’d be better off putting that in a handout and focusing on specific areas in which participants need some hands-on experience. Don’t let anything come between you and your group’s dynamics. Mobilize their energy.

2. Divide and conquer.

Most of us are familiar with the “terrible three” or the “dynamic duo” who come stalking into the classroom. Negative people can find one another. It’s uncanny. Your response is to divide and conquer by breaking participants into smaller groups and moving them around. Take advantage of the ability to move resistant people away from each other so there’s less support for the resistance. It may not enhance the learning of negative participants, but it will certainly enhance the learning of the other participants.

There are other ways to encourage positive group dynamics, and they require paying close attention to seating arrangements. In schoolroom, lecture-style, theatre, and even U-shaped seating arrangements, the unfortunate message is: I’m going to talk, and you’re going to listen. I frequently number people off, move them around the room, and cluster them in groups of five to seven. (If you’ve got less than five in a group, a dominant person can overpower the group and take control; with more than seven, shy people can get lost.) Again, you’re taking advantage of group dynamics.
I’ve done this with groups as small as six (with two triads of three each) to a group of 1,200. That may sound like a logistical nightmare, but it took about seven minutes. It was simply a matter of dividing the audience into parts and numbering them all at the same time.

3. **People will not argue with their own data.**
   This is my first law of adult learning. The more involvement and the more participation, the more learning is going to occur. So let me suggest to you there are three ways we can teach people—and why two of them generally don’t work.
   First, you can tell people things. For example, I could say “I’d like you to get the most out of what I have to say, so I’d like to start by telling you all that you’re lousy listeners. Having shared that, let me tell you that there are five power tricks for effective listening. I’ll give them to you so you can get the most out of what I have to say.” That is generally not what happens. Instead, people will say, “Wrong. I’m not a lousy listener. You’re a lousy talker. If you had something interesting to say, I’d listen, but since you don’t, I won’t. It’s your problem I’m not listening, not mine.”
   Second, you can use research and statistics. I could start the session by saying, “According to the latest behavioral studies, 95 percent of all people are lousy listeners.” Your group’s response: “Boy, you’re right. What can I do to help them? I wish my boss was here; I wish my spouse was here; I wish my co-workers were here.” In other words, they’ll think the lousy listeners are everyone else.
   Third, you can put people in situations where they can discover for themselves just how effective or ineffective they are. Remember: People do not argue with their own data. If I say it’s true, you say “He’s got to believe it; he’s the one who’s teaching.” If you say it’s true, it becomes a fact because you came up with it. You’ve got ownership of it.

4. **Review is the key.**
   Albert Mehrabian, who wrote Silent Messages, did a study that found that if people are exposed to an idea once, 10 percent will remember it after 30 days. But if those same people are exposed to an idea six times with some interval between each exposure, over 90 percent will remember it after 30 days.
   Obviously, review is essential. It doesn’t matter what you’ve covered; what matters is what people can grab onto and recall when they need it. But you should be shot on the spot if you stop and tell a group, “Let’s review what we’ve covered.” Why? Because, in my experience, when you say, “Let’s review,” three-quarters of the room will say, “It’s time to check out for a few minutes because we’ve already covered this.” What we need to do is review without calling it a review.
   How? One thing I’ve done is ask people to keep an action/idea list during sessions. I’ll stop every couple of hours and ask, “Would you quickly review your action/idea list and come up with the two most useful action ideas you’ve generated for yourself so far.” Or I’ll say, “Would you take about five minutes and as a group share the action ideas you’ve come up with so far and create a master list. Now, take 30 seconds and pick the one idea you would take away with you. Then, take another 30 seconds to come up with two big take-aways for your group.” Finally, I’ll go from group to group and pick up a new idea from each one.
   Notice what happened. You looked over your list. That’s one review. You talked about it for 30 seconds—two reviews. You decided what you were going to share with the larger group—
third review. And then we went around and polled ideas from the larger group—fourth review. But each review took a different angle. And many participants may have added an idea to their own thinking as they shared ideas in their small group. They also may have added ideas because of what was shared by the larger group. Review is key, but don’t call it review.

5. **Learning is directly proportional to the amount of fun you have.**

Learning is directly proportional to the amount of fun you have, but let your participants create the fun. I’m not saying that you need 45 minutes of structured activities with all kinds of extensive debriefings. You may gain more participant energy in a series of quick activities. They can be as short as 30 to 45 seconds or up to three to five minutes. For example, rather than lecturing on the qualities of an effective supervisor, I could have small groups discuss the best supervisor they ever had and what made that supervisor effective. I could then draw from them those same qualities.

6. **Change the pace.**

In *Use Both Sides of Your Brain*, Tony Buzan says that the average adult can listen with understanding for 90 minutes, but listens with retention for only 20 minutes. That means that you and I need a distinct change of pace every 20 minutes. Otherwise, here’s what often happens. The minute the clock starts, our participants walk in with their 20-minute heads, and we start pouring from our 90-minute pitcher. Yet they nod and smile and listen while we pour, and we think we’re doing well. Finally, we cover all our material and feel great. They listened, nodded, smiled. They understood the whole time! But what do they walk out with? Twenty minutes worth of material.

Because participants will listen for only 20 minutes with retention, you need a distinct change of pace at least every 20 minutes. The techniques aren’t hard. Move from a lecture to a small-group discussion. Move from something participants do as individuals to something they do as small groups. Number people off and move them around the room. It’s like pouring gas into a funnel; you have to stop every once in a while and let it drain down. And that ties us right back to review. Give it a change to sink in, and then come back and hit it in another way.

7. **The purpose of a presentation is to leave participants impressed by themselves, not intimidated by the instructor.**

The most successful training occurs when someone comes up to you and says, “You know, I didn’t see you do anything I can’t do.” When that happens, you’re a success. The last thing we want is participants saying, “Boy, if I could only be like that. But I can’t—so now I leave with an excuse for being less effective.”

The purpose of training is to leave people thinking, “I’m great. I’m so excited about what I can now do that I couldn’t do before. What I now know that I didn’t know before. What I now feel about myself.” Those are really the three things we train for: Attitudes, Skills, and Knowledge. I challenge anyone to show me a training text that says one of the objectives of training is to have the participants recognize the greatness of the instructor. But how many times does the ego of the trainer get in the way of training? If you use group dynamics and involvement, you’ll be going a long way to leaving people impressed with themselves.

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An instructor who feels the need constantly to lecture and who doesn’t allow participation is saying, “I feel the need to control. I feel the need to be acknowledged as the expert. And I don’t feel good enough about myself to let others feel better about themselves.”

8. **Adults bring experience to training. Allow them to use it.**

Almost all of us have shared life experiences. We may never have been managers, but if I’m in a new-managers program, I have been managed. We may never have sold, but we’ve been sold to, so we have a lot of information about what we want in an effective sales presentation. We may never have handled a customer complaint, but we’ve sure been mishandled as customers. Think about the knowledge and experience participants have. Take advantage of it. Let them share it.

9. **Help people learn how to learn.**

The old pedagogic model may have shown us how to memorize, but did it show us how to learn?

We need to use creative non-pedagogic techniques if we want to help adults learn how to learn. Our objective is not to drill information into people’s heads. We need to realize, for example, that we think in pictures, that images are retained more readily than concepts. We can create pictures to help people retain concepts: a heart for love, a lion for confidence, etc. There are dozens of other ways to help people absorb knowledge that are in tune with the way we process information. An understanding of the concepts of adult learning is essential for anyone in HRD.

10. **Teach from prepared lives as well as from prepared lessons.**

It’s not enough to know it in our heads; we need to know it in our hearts. C.S. Lewis said, “A man with an experience is never at the mercy of a man with an argument.” Have we experienced what we’re teaching. If not, we’re missing a dimension of power.