Getting Past the Lecture

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The Challenge: The "Default" of the Lecture Method

You are recruiting partners and senior associates to bring their expertise to your in-house or external CLE programs. They may be great at one-on-one mentoring and they have a practical understanding of their subject. For your courses, however, they take up nearly the entire time with a lecture. They feel comfortable with the format – it is one they know and see at many CLE courses. When asked about successful CLE experiences they have had, however, they will talk about NITA trial advocacy courses or workshops with group discussions. Why do they default to seeing themselves as "lecturers"? And how will you persuade them to make their session as instructive and engaging as possible?

The "lecture default" comes from one's law school experience. But the conditions there were different. You took notes because every scrap of the professor's lecture might be tested on an exam. You had a subject framework and textbook outline. Your use of the material was disconnected from any client or other subject. What did not make sense perhaps made sense later when your study group discussed it.

Do any of those conditions prevail in a law firm lecture-based seminar? Look around your firm's seminar room in a CLE session. How many are taking constant notes? How many have an outline for the full subject? How many are cross-referencing the materials with added "gems" from the lecture? What percentage of the participants is asking questions or being asked to speak? It is not the picture of the law school classroom.

The hope is that the expertise of the partners will be transmitted to the participants, so that months or weeks from now, the junior lawyer will know what knowledge to choose in a new situation. Regrettably, lectures do not work like a science fiction brain transplant. The participants have a very slim chance of recalling any of the information. With an excellent lecture and outline, participants might remember where to go back to materials and look it up again. In short, while the lecturer "covered the topics", very little long-term learning and recall has taken place. Two main reasons for this waste of time and resources are: (1) the weakness of the session's original learning objectives and (2) the failure to use adult education insights in running CLE sessions.

In our PDI session, we will review the importance of learner-centred learning objectives and the adult education reasons to move away from the dominance of lectures.

The tips that follow will help your presenters keep a "safe" lecture format for parts of the session, but also exploit adult education insights to depart from the lecture and promote greater actual learning. The tips range from the modest to the ambitious. The goal of each one is to recognize participant needs, different learning styles, and the desire to participate. Share these tips with your speakers. They may be a catalyst for exciting changes.

The Strategies

1. Engage the Participants Early

- Take a "show of hands" inventory of your participants. (E.g., How many here have run a deposition? How many have handled this feature of a securities filing?)
- Ask a yes/no question to sound out participants' opinions. (E.g., How many here believe that the decision on the motion last month was properly decided?)
- Ask for four or five volunteers to state what they expect to learn or gain from the workshop; reply briefly and honestly about whether you will meet those expectations

2. Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a technique for getting many responses to a narrowly framed question in a short period of time. The presenter asks the participants to help create a list, suggest alternatives, state solutions, or identify characteristics. The rules for successful brainstorming are:

- Pose a question that can be answered with a few words or a phrase. (E.g., In a few words, what are the most important things to get organized at the beginning of a due diligence review?)
- Tell the participants that you want as few words and as many ideas as possible.
- Ask the participants not to challenge or judge the ideas of others immediately;
- Write down all the phrases or ideas on an overhead (flipchart in a smaller group); better yet, have a colleague write them down while you field the ideas.
- Stop and review the "themes" and the important points on the brainstormed list.
- Relate your expertise and experience to some of the points.
- If problem-solving, identify some of the most viable solutions in your experience.

3. Pairs Exercise: Exchange with a Partner

Ask each participant to speak to a neighbor and learn one thing (specified in advance by the leader) from that person. Switch roles and have the other person conduct the interview. The "one thing" should be brief and within the work experience of the participants (e.g., "Tell your partner about the experience of conducting your first solo deposition").

When the exchange is complete (less than five minutes), ask for four or five insights that people gained from listening to their partners. Write the points down and incorporate them in the next phase of your delivery (e.g., Now we know the main anxieties are in a first deposition, what can we do to help more junior associates deal with the situation?).

4. Quick Test

This approach works well when you are building skills or need to confirm that one concept has been understood before you move to the next.
Display an overhead showing an applied example of the concept or skill you have been talking about (e.g., Which of these sentences contains the passive voice? What is the impact on the reader?). The “test” should be simple and not described as a “test.” Instead, ask for help in solving a problem (e.g., An attorney made this reply to the “final offer” of the other side in negotiations - would it meet the criteria we have been talking about?).

5. Case Study

Using real cases from the practice area, get a senior associate to help write a case study that will require participants to apply the learning points. In addition, create a few structured questions to place below the case study. In training for project management, for example, I have one case for each practice group represented in the room. The “case” has just been assigned to the group and they have to work out the initial project management steps – applying what has been taught. After a first round, new facts for each case are handed out and later stage project management methods have to be applied.

6. Seventh Inning Stretch

In any session longer than one hour, call for a two or three-minute “stand and stretch” break. Or you may prefer to promise the “Blackberry break” so that you have their attention for the session, but promise a check in time for their ongoing matters. Ask the participants to remain in their places and stick to your time deadline. It works - they get refreshed for the next topic and they won’t go away.

7. Run a Short Demonstration

Although many topics involve cognitive learning, some issues can be demonstrated effectively with short simulations. For example, suppose two panellists have opposing views on how to conduct a trial procedure or handle a tough situation. Ask them each to demonstrate, as a role-play, exactly what they would do and say. The participants watch and then ask questions that are relevant to their particular practice.

8. Buzz Groups

This technique is for more adventurous workshop leaders. Allocate 20 to 30 minutes for a break-out group discussion of an issue or problem. Ideally, the problem will be in the materials or displayed on an overhead. The problem must be short and call for a resolution. Participants all stay in the room for this activity. The ground rules for success in a buzz group are as follows:

- Create groups of eight to ten participants by walking through the aisles pointing out the groups (better still, have everyone seated at banquet round tables in the first place).

- Set a time limit for discussion.
- Have each group appoint a reporter/recorder to report back to the large group.
- On reporting back, ask each group spokesperson to report on only one issue or introduce one new point.
- Summarize the findings or trends among participants as a whole.
- Permit only a limited amount of group-to-group exchange between spokespersons.

Conclusion

Obviously, not all these methods will work in each presentation: some will be best suited to certain speakers; others will be more appropriate for certain groups of participants; and still others will best fit certain subject areas. With that in mind, explain and even demonstrate some of these methods to your presenters, and pass along this article. Your speakers will find new ways to engage the participants, and you will find your firm's programs are taking on new life. The biggest payoff will be in the recall and retention of participants. When they must interact with the instructor and the material, they remember.