

Participatory Lecture Technique: Increasing Learner Involvement in a Traditionally Passive Setting

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Regularly labeled the least effective setting for learning, the lecture is nevertheless routinely used to communicate family science course content. The Participatory Lecture Technique (PLT) seeks to put lecture material in the hands of the learners—literally—and stimulate learner involvement. PLT utilizes visual aids to illustrate concepts, especially posters with key words and images. Distributed around the lecture hall and held by students, the posters provide an outline of concepts that the lecturer then “follows” around the room. PLT creates movement and variety in the lecture hall. PLT also encourages use of graphic images to represent concepts, which enhances most learners’ ability to recall concepts later. Feedback from students suggests that PLT assists in note-taking and also helps set the pace for a lecture.


The Lecture Format

Regularly labeled the least effective setting for learning, the lecture is nevertheless routinely used to communicate course content to students (Busby, 1996; Day, 1996; Felder, 1992). Lecture is sometimes the only appropriate means for conveying large amounts of material (Klein & White, 1996). While the lecture format is effective with highly motivated learners, not all students can be described as highly motivated (Marotz-Baden, Osborne, & Hunts, 2000). All of these statements generate agreement by many lecturers. While understanding the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the format, lecturers nevertheless question the value of delivering course material in this traditionally passive setting.

The lecturer’s responsibility is great: to do justice to the material while engaging learners in the process.

Multiple Strategies

The lecturer should draw on multiple strategies, such as use of visuals and demonstrations, to reduce the negatives associated with the lecture format (Felder & Brent, 1998). The most common aids are the blackboard, the overhead projector, hand-outs, televised notes, and computer technologies (Marincovich, 1998). While such

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strategies can be used effectively to explain lecture concepts, they may not stimulate participation. They deliver information and learners receive it.

As research into learning styles indicates, only certain learners are well suited to this type of information delivery. A class of students with different learning styles benefits from a variety of teaching styles (Felder & Silverman, 1988). Every style cannot be accommodated in every 50-minute lecture, but over the course of a semester, a variety of methods can be included.

Additionally, exposure to a variety of methods encourages learners to use different techniques when they, themselves, make presentations (Marotz-Baden et al., 2000). Such exposure is especially important for university students who are preparing for careers in family life education (FLE).

Participatory Lecture Technique (PLT) is one method of lecturing that can be included to increase variety. PLT seeks to put the lecture material in the hands of the learners—literally—and stimulate learner involvement. The technique, developed over the course of the author's graduate studies and first two years of university teaching and conference presenting, provides stimulation to both learners and lecturer in what many consider the most challenging of educational settings—the lecture hall.

Description of PLT

This technique utilizes multiple visual aids to illustrate concepts and stimulate learner participation. The primary aids are key word posters with the lecturer's speaking notes. Posters with key words and, ideally, images representing the concepts, are distributed around the lecture hall. On the backs of posters are the lecturer's notes pertaining to that concept.

Typically, students along the periphery of the total seating area are asked to hold the posters. Depending on the seating arrangement and size of room, students are asked to either hold the poster above their heads or to stand and hold the poster so that it is visible to the audience while the lecturer addresses that topic.

As the lecturer speaks to the key word concepts, students holding the posters are encouraged to make corrections or additions according to the speaking notes on the backs of posters. When speaking, the lecturer may elect to intentionally omit certain points that may be effectively delivered by a student. Such points should be easily spotted by the student, however, and should not include difficult-to-pronounce words or similar stumbling blocks.

To enhance understanding of very detailed information, the lecturer may supplement key word posters with visual

Free Sample Posters Available Online

Posters in PDF format may be printed out for use in single classrooms. Link to these lecture topics from:

www.marybold.com/posters/list.htm

- ◆ Cognitive Functioning in Adulthood (includes detailed speaker's notes from backs of posters)
- ◆ Stereotype Threat Theory (no speaker's notes included)
- ◆ Timeline of Family Studies
- ◆ Median Marrying Ages
- ◆ Divorce Rates

} These posters can be used in the classroom as a matching activity; students can be referred to a website for their own printout in HTML: www.marybold.com/timeline.htm

displays (such as overhead transparency or computer display) at the front of the room. Besides providing “fill in the gaps” information, such displays increase the number of focal points that help some students stay involved in the lecture process.

Benefits of PLT

PLT creates movement in the lecture hall. Besides simply providing the action of some people standing, the process of advancing around the room from poster to poster indicates the progress of the lecture and helps everyone find a rhythm or pacing for the lecture time. Participation by learners holding posters mimics participation in a discussion group, although obviously the lecturer monopolizes virtually all speaking time. With a variety of visual displays, learners frequently change their posture, turn their heads, and focus on different objects at different distances. This variety helps break up the time spent in lecture and reduces the monotony of staring in one direction for an entire lecture. PLT posters also encourage use of graphic images to represent concepts. Such images enhance most learners’ ability to recall concepts later, and they are essential to some learners’ understanding of concepts.

The task of holding a poster is not so great as to intimidate even the quietest student. When more gregarious students hold posters, they tend to add a few comments or give the lecturer praise after completing notes on a concept. Frequently, humor is thus injected in a lecture that has no other possibility for generating laughter. Humor is also enjoyed when a student is able to correct the lecturer on a missed point or a mis-stated fact. A good-natured

response by the lecturer invites students to listen closely and try to “catch” more inaccuracies.

Using PLT, the lecturer can assume that with even the driest material at least some students will be involved and will pay attention: those who are holding the posters and looking at the speaker’s notes. More optimistically, a large number of learners will feel involved in the lecture process and will benefit from the variety of movement, visual aids, and comments generated by using PLT.

When used in a university course of Family Life Education, PLT serves as example of creating novel ways to deliver information to learners. University students preparing for careers in FLE are thus introduced to the concept of accommodating multiple learning styles as well as to the goal of utilizing a variety of techniques to engage learners’ attention.

Formal evaluation of PLT has not been undertaken. Feedback from students and conference participants has been positive. Those who comment typically remark that posters made note-taking easier and that the pace of the lecture kept them engaged. A frequent event after classroom lectures is for one student to approach another holding a poster in order to record details from the back of the poster. The technique has not received negative comment but that may be because the technique has not been included in regular classroom evaluation.

Recommendations for Visual Aids

Key word or image posters can be produced inexpensively on an inkjet or laser printer that accommodates 11” x 17” paper. Utilizing color, photographs, and large fonts

for words, eye-catching posters can be designed to follow a lecture's outline or main points. Lamination is recommended if the posters will be re-used.

After creating the posters with computer technology, the lecturer may also use the electronic files to create matching overhead transparencies, PowerPoint displays, or other computer displays to include statistics or other details that enhance the information on the poster. Speaking notes can be printed on the backs of posters or taped on later. Of course, a lecturer may choose to keep a set of the speaking notes at the podium, also.

Although material varies from one subject area to another, PLT works best when the lecture advances quickly "through" the posters. A change of posters every few minutes or so is not unreasonable. So, for a one-hour lecture, 20 or 30 posters may be called for.

The lecturer may elect to post full lecture notes on the Internet, as has become common in the past decade. A file can be created to reflect the posters, also, as an overview of the lecture. Possible file formats are .html (Hypertext Markup Language for a web page), .pdf (Portable Document File for a read-only display for on-screen viewing or downloading), and .ppt (PowerPoint file). Samples reflecting the author's use of PLT were created in PageMaker software and posted on the Internet in PDF format (Bold, 2000). The samples are available online at www.marybold.com/posters/list.htm.

Conclusion

PLT serves as an additional visual aid strategy in presenting lectures. The technique involves learners in the process of lecture without intimidating or burdening them. By providing a variety of focal points,

PLT creates movement in the lecture hall. It also provides relief for students from having one line of sight and holding one posture. Feedback from students suggests that PLT assists in note-taking and also helps set the pace for a lecture.

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