

8 Tips for Balancing Dialogue with Content

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No matter how well you've planned and how strong your learning design is, there is often a tension between working through all of the planned content and facilitating good dialogue to ensure learning. Below are some strategies to better respond to the needs of learners for dialogue while staying accountable for teaching the new content.

1. The right “What” for the “When”

Even before you begin teaching you will want to review your design to make sure that there isn't too much content planned for the amount of time available. If there is, find areas that may be less important to address (the needs assessment responses can be helpful with these decisions) or places where you could save time by reducing the amount of content or the number items for learners to work on. If all the content is critical see if you can arrange for more time or multiple sessions.

EXAMPLE: Shorten a presentation; Ask the group to think of 2 instead of 4 ideas.

2. Sampling

It is not usually necessary to use large group time to hear all answers or questions. This can de-energize and not be relevant for all learners. Instead, use pair and small groups to allow for high-energy dialogue where everyone will find their own relevance, and the large group to hear a few ideas to honour the work done.

EXAMPLE: “We'll hear a few examples.”; “Let's hear from 1 more person.”

3. Quantification

When you are running short on time, reducing the number of items you are asking the group to work on or share back is an easy way to stay true to the design AND save time.

EXAMPLE: “Let's hear 1 idea from each group.”; “Choose 2 strategies to try out.”

4. Set the time

Let the group know how much time they will have so that they can work more efficiently. Give reminders when time is almost up.

EXAMPLE: “You'll have 10 minutes to complete this task.”

5. Keep yourself on track

Remember that you want to give the learning over to the learners as much as possible. In an effort to provide lots of great information we can sometimes over-explain content or add our own ideas and examples to the dialogue – some is good, too much takes time away from the learners exploring ideas themselves. Ask yourself, “Am I adding more than is needed here?”

Plan ahead of time how much time is available for each task and notes for yourself in your manual. Keep a clock in sight (or even 2!) so that you are aware of how much time is left.

6. Use a Parking Lot

The 'Parking Lot' technique can help people stay on topic and on time – without losing valuable ideas, questions, or concerns, which aren't directly linked to the current content. By 'parking' them temporarily on a highly visible flip chart, you communicate the importance of these items and your commitment to addressing them . . . but not right now. You may choose to address them in a future task, in private or in follow-up to the learning event.

EXAMPLE: "That's a great question Susan! We can address that when we're talking about communication skills a little later. How about we add it to our Parking Lot and please remind us when we get to that section."

7. Respond effectively to talkative learners

When a learner is overly talkative and dominates discussion, affirm their contributions but turn it over to others in the group.

EXAMPLE: "Thank you Ken that's helpful. What ideas do others have?" or "I appreciate your ideas Ken. Let's hear from some other members of the group too."

If the issue continues, you could try to minimize large group discussion and focus on individual work and small group work so that everyone has an opportunity to do the learning. Another strategy is to take the person aside at a break to discuss your concern.

EXAMPLE: "Tina, I love the energy and knowledge you bring to our group. It's important we make sure others in the group have the same opportunity to share their ideas."; "Please keep sharing your thoughts but let's try to make sure the others have a chance to share their ideas as well."

8. Put it to the group

When time is running short or much more time is being spent on a particular part of the content than was originally planned, ask the group how they want to proceed. Accountability to the objectives that were shared with the group before/at the beginning of the session is critical so agreement from the entire group is important before making a decision to stop or continue the dialogue.

EXAMPLE: "This seems to be a particularly important issue for the group! We could to spend another 10 minutes on this and stay a bit longer today. What would you like to do?"; "We had planned to talk about physical activity next, but if the group would like to spend more time on this topic we could leave that for another time. How would you like to move ahead?"

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