Audience Engagement Strategy Book

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POTENT PRESENTATIONS
MESSAGE • DESIGN • DELIVERY

WHAT is audience engagement? We use the term "audience engagement" to refer to strategies for encouraging and supporting your audience to pay attention, and to intellectually engage with you, your material, and each other. These strategies should be used in conjunction with other p2i materials on Message, Design, and Delivery. They do not replace good content or effective presentation design! This Audience Engagement Strategy Book provides tips for effectively engaging audiences during presentations.

WHY is audience engagement important? Successful presenters are masters at engaging audiences. Their presentations are captivating and memorable, and audience members walk away having learned something from them. Effective presenters not only deliver content in a way that is compelling, but they also reduce the attraction and temptation of distractions for audience members, such as checking email, texting, and engaging in side conversations not related to the presentation. Since it is now widely accepted that learning is socially constructed, engaging audience members with you and with each other provides even more insurance that your message, design, and delivery will indeed prove successful.

HOW do you engage audiences? Successful presenters engage audiences with strategies that make them feel part of the presentation. They engage them in the content, rather than simply delivering the content to them. Education literature is replete with the benefits of active learning. The connections between emotions and learning, and movement and learning are well established and these connections are relevant for adult learners as well. It's a natural extension for us to adopt these principles for presentations. After all, learning is the expected result of any presentation, right? Even if the goal of your presentation is to persuade the audience or sell them on an idea, it involves you teaching them something about your content.

Start with the basics. Learn the tenets of good public speaking and group facilitation skills. Use appropriate voice control and volume, appropriate body language and stance, and evoke emotions with your content. Use humor as necessary, and own up to any mistakes you may make. Pay attention to the audience – what are their facial expressions and body language telling you? How are they interacting with each other? Do they appear to understand, or are they confused? Are they interested or bored? Monitor and adjust your presentation accordingly.

Introduction to the Audience Engagement Strategies

Many of these strategies are suitable for use during various parts of the presentation – beginning, middle, or end – and are flexible enough to allow you to determine exactly how much time you want to spend on them. Many help you facilitate processing or reflection time for participants in fun ways. These strategies also provide you, the presenter, information about what your audience is thinking and how they are feeling, so you can monitor and adjust as needed. Strategies are listed in order of ease of application in any session type. Each strategy is marked with a set of icons to let you know how the strategy rates on a number of dimensions, and for which types of sessions it is most appropriate.

Each strategy is rated on the following dimensions:

Ease of application
simple (no prep or practice)
moderate (some prep or practice)
involved (significant prep or practice necessary)

Materials needed
none
few (chart paper & markers)
specialized or customized (specific texts, software)

Movement
no movement (participants stay in chairs)
some movement (participants move to other chairs)
significant movement (participants move about room)

Cost involved
no cost
low cost
costly

Time needed to execute
up to 15 minutes
15-30 minutes
30-45 minutes

Each strategy is identified as to its appropriate session types:

Presentations
lecture or speech
keynote
paper/multi-paper
panel
Ignite

Professional development/workshop
professional development workshops
demonstration
skill building
round table
think tank

Webinar
online learning environment

All types of presentations or professional development sessions

Strategies	Dimensions					Session Types		
	Ease	Materials	Movement	Cost	Time	Presentation	Workshop	Webinar
Eye contact	📋	✂	🏃	💲	🕐	🧑‍🏫	🛠	
Proximity	📋	✂	🏃	💲	🕐	🧑‍🏫	🛠	
Rhetorical questions	📋	✂	🏃	💲	🕐	🧑‍🏫	🛠	🖥
Turn and talk	📋	✂	🏃	💲	🕐	🧑‍🏫	🛠	
Think-pair-share	📋	✂	🏃	💲	🕐	🧑‍🏫	🛠	
Simple polls	📋	✂	🏃	💲	🕐	🧑‍🏫	🛠	🖥
Audience voting	📋📋	✂✂	🏃	💲	🕐🕐	🧑‍🏫	🛠	🖥
Write & stick	📋📋	✂✂	🏃	💲💲	🕐🕐		🛠	
Reflection	📋	✂	🏃	💲	🕐🕐	🧑‍🏫	🛠	🖥
Jigsaw	📋📋📋	✂✂✂	🏃🏃	💲	🕐🕐🕐		🛠	
Inside-outside circle	📋📋	✂	🏃🏃🏃	💲	🕐🕐🕐		🛠	
Four corners	📋📋	✂	🏃🏃🏃	💲	🕐🕐🕐		🛠	
Carousel brainstorming	📋📋	✂✂	🏃🏃🏃	💲	🕐🕐🕐		🛠	
Snowball fight	📋📋	✂	🏃🏃🏃	💲	🕐🕐		🛠	
Gallery walk	📋📋📋	✂✂	🏃🏃🏃	💲	🕐🕐		🛠	
Quote mingle	📋📋📋	✂✂✂	🏃🏃🏃	💲	🕐🕐		🛠	
Sculpt a symbol	📋📋📋	✂✂✂	🏃	💲💲	🕐🕐🕐		🛠	
Poster session	📋📋	✂✂	🏃	💲	🕐🕐🕐		🛠	
Picture connections	📋📋	✂✂✂	🏃🏃🏃	💲💲💲	🕐🕐		🛠	
Social media connections	📋📋	✂	🏃	💲	🕐	🧑‍🏫	🛠	🖥

Eye contact

Dimensions 📋✂️🏃💲⏰
Session Type 🧑‍🏫🛠️

The importance of this seemingly simple strategy cannot be underestimated. Eye contact with your audience shows emotion and interest in them, as well as interest in your topic. Eye contact helps you create a connection with your audience, establish credibility, and serves a dual purpose of gathering information from them. As you read your audience for cues about their level of engagement throughout your presentation, you gain the added benefit of being able to adjust your presentation accordingly.

Quick tip

Vary your gaze. Look at different sections of the audience at different times, and don't be afraid to make brief eye contact with one individual at a time.

Proximity

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Session Type 🧑‍🏫🛠️

Teachers use proximity to connect with students and keep them on task. The same technique can work for your adult audience. Move about the room as you speak. You can walk among tables, or up and down aisles in auditorium-style seating. This will encourage audience members to follow you with their eyes and, in effect, limits opportunities for them to disengage. It also signals to them that you are interested and invested in them. Walking near tables is also a subtle way to limit side conversations that may erupt during the presentation, and may let you off the hook for having to call out the offenders.

Quick tip

Use this strategy sparingly. Don't jog around the room or stay in constant motion. If you need a microphone for your presentation, request a wireless hand held or lavaliere microphone that clips to your clothing.
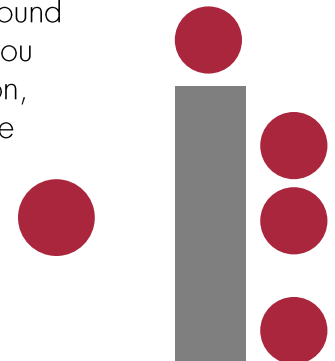
Rhetorical questions

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Session Type 🎧 ALL

Asking participants to think about the answer to a question even if they do not have the opportunity to answer aloud can keep them engaged. Ask questions that are relevant to them and make them think. Ask them to consider the "what ifs" (e.g. What would you have done? How would you feel if…? Have you ever…? How would you go about…? Have you ever considered…?).

Quick tip
Sprinkle questions in where appropriate throughout the presentation. Don't overdo it!
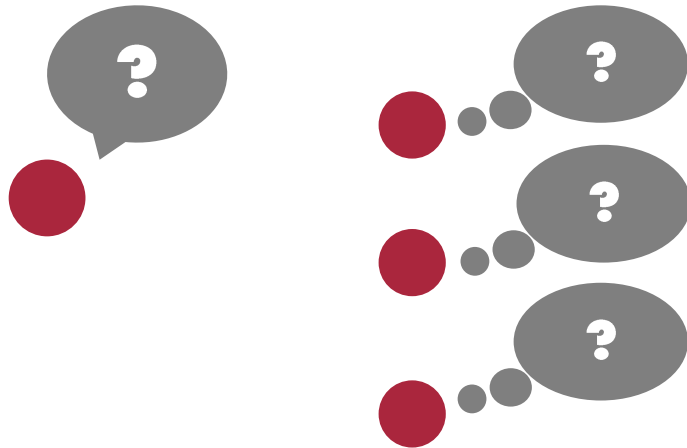
Turn and talk

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Session Type 🧑‍🏫 🛠

Posing a question and asking audience members to turn and talk with a nearby participant allows for all to participate simultaneously and invites every audience member to become part of the presentation. Use this strategy as a warm-up activity as you introduce your topic, after a long segment of a presentation to help audience members process what they have just heard, as a way for them to discuss ideas and learn from each other, or as a closing activity to review key learnings.

Quick tip
Ask audience members to turn and talk for 1-3 minutes. Plan a strategy to regain attention. Without a microphone, this can be challenging. Use a timer that is loud enough to be heard over conversations, or ask them to look for your raised hand as a signal to close their conversations.

Variation
Ask audience members to talk in groups of 3-6 if they are seated at tables. As there are more people who need to share ideas, give this a bit more time. A general rule of thumb is about 1 minute per participant.

Think-pair-share

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Similar to "turn and talk," this strategy features a little more structure and the opportunity for audience members to share aloud. Ask audience members to take some time (1-3 minutes) to think about a question, scenario, or topic individually (note: this is silent time), and then discuss in pairs to answer the question or share ideas (another 2-3 minutes). Finally, ask one member of the pair to share aloud their collective answers or idea.

Quick tip
With a small group and ample time, each pair can share out responses to the larger audience. Encourage participants to speak loudly (try to avoid having to repeat what each audience member says) so that all can hear. With a larger group and less time, select just a few volunteers to share out responses. In a larger room with a larger audience, walk around with a handheld microphone to bring to participants who share out responses.

Lyman 1981

Simple polls

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Session Type 🎧

Simply ask a question of your audience and ask them to raise their hands in response. Be prepared to react to the number of hands you see and make clear connections back to your content.

Quick tip
Ask audience members to keep their hands raised while they look around to see how many others have raised hands, or at least summarize for the audience how many (or what proportion of the audience) you saw with raised hands and state why that is important or how it relates to the topic. Many webinar platforms also allow participants to click a "raise hand" button.

Audience Polling

If your audience is likely to have internet-connected devices (i.e. smartphones, tablets), take advantage, and have them use their devices to answer questions. [Poll Everywhere](#) is one example of a text messaging (SMS) polling or audience voting service. If you're using a computer and projector, you can project results on the screen in real time. You will need to prepare the questions and response options in advance, know where in your presentation you will insert this strategy, and be prepared to respond as the real time data comes in.

Caution
Check Wi-Fi availability at the conference site. Many text messaging platforms have a free basic level, but you may have to pay to allow a larger group of participants to vote.

Write & Stick

Have your audience write ideas on sticky notes (these could be responses to a question such as "What elements belong in an evaluation plan?"; "What are ways in which evaluators can elicit stakeholder participation?"),and stick them on chart paper. One idea per sticky note. In groups, they can work to sequence, prioritize, or otherwise organize to make sense of the ideas. Charts can be posted on the walls for further review and discussion if time and space permit.

Quick tip
Charts can also be labeled with subtopics, specific questions, or divided in any number of ways – e.g. before and after, compare and contrast, what I learned and what I want to know more about, etc. The possibilities are endless.

Advanced strategy
Try [padlet.com](#). Audience members can log in and post virtual sticky notes on a group "wall" with their ideas. These will appear in real time and the presenter can move the notes around the screen as they are posted. Check Wi-Fi availability.

Reflection

Audience members appreciate time for individual processing and reflection, especially when content is new for them. There are many ways to do this, and the time can be from one to 20 minutes, depending on how much time you have and to what degree you want people to reflect. Reflection prompts can be as simple as "Take a moment to reflect on that point" to specific questions that may require writing – e.g. Which points resonated most with you and why? Which strategies are you most likely to apply in your specific context? How will you use what you have learned today?

Quick tip
Create and distribute a graphic organizer with reflection prompts.

Jigsaw

If you want participants to read a portion of a text (e.g. journal article) but get a sense of the whole text (or a larger part of it), try a jigsaw. Divide the material into 3-5 parts. Assign each member of a table to read one part. This person's job is to become the "expert" on that portion of the material so that it can then be summarized with the rest of their group. Participants read their assigned sections independently, and then "experts" take turns sharing out in table groups such that all participants learn something about each section.

Variation
Assign entire tables to read sections and become "experts." After reading time, have participants form new groups comprised of at least one "expert" on each section.

Quick tip
Pre-read your text and ensure it will make sense to people who only read a portion of it. You may want everyone to read an introductory section before moving on to their "expert" sections.

Aronson, N.d.

Inside/Outside Circle

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Session Type ⚒

Have participants form two standing concentric circles. Half of them are standing with their backs to the inside of the circle facing out. The other half form an outside circle facing those in the inside circle. You can divide participants by having them count off by twos. The "ones" form the inner circle and the "twos" form the outer circle. Once they are facing each other, assign a question or topic for them to discuss. Assign the inside circle to talk first (i.e. for 1-2 minutes), and then assign the outside circle to share or respond for the same amount of time. Then, ask the outside circle to step to the right and form a new partnership. Do as many moves as time permits. You will need to prepare at least one question or discussion prompt to use this strategy.

Quick tip
Use this strategy only for groups of about 10-40 and only if you have enough free space in the room for audience members to be comfortable standing in circles for a period of time.

Kagan 1996

Four Corners

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Session Type ⚒

Choose just about any topic or question that has 3 or 4 positions or answers (e.g. In your family are you a first born, only child, oldest child, or in the middle? In your evaluation work, do you mainly use qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods? Do you consider yourself a novice, experienced, or expert evaluator?) and ask participants to walk to the corner of the room that you specify. Once there, give them an opportunity (3-5 minutes) to discuss this commonality, then return to their seats. If time permits, call on volunteers to share some insights from their brief discussion.

Variation
Ask participants a question that requires them to take sides (usually two sides, but could be three or more). Ask them to walk to the side of the room assigned to that position, and discuss with others who share their views. You can ask them to form two lines facing each other and have a debate with participants from each side presenting support for their position.

Carousel Brainstorming

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Session Type ⚒

(aka Rotating Review or Graffiti)

Have 3-6 chart paper sheets posted around the room with questions or subtopics. Divide your audience into groups of 3-6, have them choose a scribe, and assign each group a different colored marker they will use on the chart paper. Assign each group to a chart paper. Give groups 2-5 minutes to discuss and respond to the question or topic posted. When time is up, have each group rotate to the next paper where they will then read the new topic or question, see how the previous group responded, discuss in their group, and add their responses. Continue rotating until groups arrive back at their first paper. Give them a moment or two to reflect on what other groups added to their original responses.

Quick tip
Have tape on hand to post chart paper, or use sticky chart paper.

Caution
Topics or questions cannot have an inherent order. It must make sense for any participant to start at any chart.

Snowball Fight

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Session Type ⚒

Admittedly not the "greenest" of activities, this is a nice activity if you want to have a little fun, liven things up, and have audience members process your content. Have each participant write 1-2 sentences on a piece of paper. This could be a reaction to something you have presented, a response to a question, a connection they have made to the material, something new they have learned, an action they will take following the session, etc. Ask them to wad up their papers into "snowballs," stand up, and proceed with a "snowball fight" whereby they toss the papers at one another and around the room. Have them continue picking up "snowballs" and tossing them until you call time (no more than 30 seconds). At this point, each participant is to pick up the closest "snowball" and in turn, read aloud the statements on it.

Quick tip
Ask audience members to write legibly, so that someone else will be able to read their responses. Ask them to be mindful and not direct "snowballs" at people's faces, and to be cautious around beverages and water pitchers that may be on tables.

Gallery Walk

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Session Type ⚒

Any time you have audience members create something – a chart, a poster, a sculpture, etc. – whether individually or in groups, have the large group go on a gallery walk in the same way they might progress through an art gallery or museum. This gives everyone an opportunity to view each other's work and gather ideas from each other. This can be as unstructured as simply asking people to get up and go visit around the room at their leisure for a specified amount of time, or as structured as giving them a graphic organizer and asking them to collect some sort of data from each station, proceeding in a certain order, and spending a specified amount of time at each station.

Quote Mingle

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Session Type ⚒

This requires some preparation in that you will gather quotes about a topic and print them out on cards – enough for each participant to have one. Use this activity as an icebreaker opportunity for participants to introduce themselves, or during or at the end of the session to have them make a connection to your content. Distribute cards randomly, and ask each participant to get with a partner. Partners read their quotes, say briefly what the quotes mean to them, introduce themselves, answer your question, or relate the quote to their situation, etc. Once the exchange is over, call time and ask partners to exchange quotes, and find a different partner. Exchanges as time permits.

Quick tip
You don't need to gather as many quotes as participants. You can repeat quotes two or three times to produce larger sets of cards.

Caution
You will need a microphone or loud projecting voice to be able to call time to switch partners and to end the activity. This activity will be challenging with a group larger than 60 people.

Sculpt a Symbol

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Session Type ⚒

Here's another one for having some fun while letting participants process what they have learned. Bring enough modeling clay or compound (e.g. Play-Doh) for each participant (or every other participant if they work in pairs) to use. Ask participants to sculpt an object or scene that symbolizes or depicts the major concept or something they have learned from the session. Ask them to hold up or bring their sculptures to the front to share with the group.

Quick tip
This works best with smaller groups, and as groups get larger, have them work in pairs or even trios to minimize the amount of material you must purchase and carry.

Variation
Use pipe cleaners (chenille stems) instead of clay.

Poster Session

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Session Type ⚒

Give small groups of participants chart paper and markers and ask them to illustrate the main points of the presentation or their connections to the session, or perhaps action steps they will take as a result of attending your session. Have each group hold up their posters and describe their illustrations. They can then hang posters on the walls and see each other's work during breaks, or you can plan time for them to go on a gallery walk (see page 11).

Picture Connections

Spread out a selection of picture postcards on a table. Ask participants to go to the table and select a card they can make a connection to in response to a question you ask (e.g. What does evaluation mean to you?) related to your presentation topic. Have participants stand in a circle and share their connections aloud.

Quick tip
Find a vintage postcard dealer to get interesting cards without place names on the front. Buy a selection of postcard-sized art prints, old black and white photos, famous people, buildings, animals, etc. Look for funny or strange situations that lend themselves to different interpretations. Try to have more cards than participants so that people have a choice. With large groups, run two (or more) separate sharing circles to cut down on the time needed for this activity.

Variation
Print out a selection of interesting imagery from stock photo sites (these can be free or paid sites). Mind copyright laws and look for pictures you are free to share!

Social media connections

Ask audience members to tweet out (or post on other social media platforms) what they are learning from you. Give them a hashtag for the event and your Twitter handle so they can tag you. If time permits, you can even show tweets on a large screen as they come in.

Caution
This is not for the faint of heart or less than technically savvy, and you must have the facilitation skills to bring the audience back to attention. Check Wi-Fi availability at the conference site.

#eval14   @SheilaBRobinson

#p2i   #p2i

@SheilaBRobinson   #eval14

Bonus Section on Webinars and Online courses

Get them talking!

Teach participants to use their microphones and mute feature properly and then get them to speak up and join in the discussion. You can call on specific participants to answer a question, or ask for volunteers. Most webinar software also has a "raise hand" feature you can encourage participants to use.

Quick Tip
Sign onto your webinar about 10 minutes in advance and get people to introduce themselves to you and to each other, either using the microphone or a chat box.

Be interactive!

Design activities where participants can give input as you create something on screen (e.g. developing a logic model).

Get them typing!

If your software allows it, keep a chat box open for brainstorming and participant interaction throughout the webinar. When you have the opportunity during the course, you can share aloud some of their responses. It's also possible to save the conversation and give participants access after the webinar, often they will share ideas and resources with each other in the chat.

Give them homework!

With a multi-session course, give participants homework and ask them to send it to you. The assignment can even be to send in questions. Then, share selected assignments or questions, and respond to them.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Create high quality relevant content using other Potent Presentations Initiative tools and following guidelines for Messaging, Design, and Delivery.

Toastmasters International website has information on joining your local Toastmasters Club as well as free resources on public speaking skills.

Six Minutes Speaking and Presentation Skills features resources on speechwriting, delivery techniques, PowerPoint and visuals, speaker habits, speech critiques, book reviews, and more.

Presentation Zen features Garr Reynolds' fabulous blog on all things presentation, along with links to his many books.

Seven Simple Strategies to Engage Any Audience – In this brief article, Shelia Robinson describes some of these strategies and offers links to additional resources.

Dipsticks: Efficient Ways to Check for Understanding – In this article Todd Finley makes a research-based case for using formative assessment, distinguishes it from summative assessment, and offers more than 50 simple ways to assess student learning, many of which are appropriate for adult learning as well.

National School Reform Faculty Protocols and Activities – You will have to read through a bunch to find ones appropriate for adult learners, but there are some gems, especially for longer sessions and professional development workshops.

Liberating Structures – A menu of 33 discussion protocols for enhancing participation, building relationships, community, and trust among participants. These are best for longer sessions or professional development workshops.

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