



# Technical Note on Effective Lecture and Discussion Techniques



Modernizing an extension and advisory services system in any location requires competent field agents and others who know and/or have access to content needed at the local level and are able to teach that content using proven teaching strategies and methodology.

## Lecture

The lecture is probably the oldest teaching technique and is still the method used most widely throughout the world (McKeachie et al., 2006). Unfortunately, fewer instructors have mastered the technique; instead, they “talk” to the group, with inadequate preparation and structure. The question, then, is how can lectures be made effective?

### Strengths of Using Lectures

Despite its “bad reputation,” an effective lecture has many strengths. Lecture is very efficient; large amounts of information can be conveyed in a short period of time. Lecture permits maximum instructor control and minimal threat to learners. Lecture communicates to large audiences at the same time. Lecture is also effective in presenting new information that may not be available in written or electronic format yet.

### Weaknesses of Using Lectures

There are some drawbacks to using the lecture technique. First, the learners are passive and may become disengaged or disinterested. The instructor does not have an opportunity to get feedback from the learners. Lecture assumes that all learners are at the same level of knowledge and can progress at the same pace. Lecture requires an effective speaker, and it is not well suited for higher levels of learning.

### When to Lecture

Extension field agents may be faced with several opportunities to rely upon the lecture technique to share information. In areas where communication of new knowledge is not easy in other forms, field agents can share the latest ideas and techniques with farmers and others without waiting for other communication methods. Field agents draw the content of their presentations from a variety of sources, so lecture allows the agent to assimilate the content and present information from several in presentation and to adapt the content for the audience. Lecture can help field agents and others emphasize the key concepts that are needed by the learners.



*This Technical Note is from a series on Effective Teaching and Learning. Modernizing an extension and advisory services system in any location requires competent field agents and others who know and/or have access to content needed at the local level and are able to teach that content using proven teaching strategies and methodology. These technical papers should be utilized by anyone involved in the training of extension professionals.*

## Making Lectures Effective

To help make lectures more effective, follow these suggestions.

### Preparation and Organization

- Fit the lecture to the audience. Be sure to address their needs, not what you believe they need.
- Determine the overall focus of the lecture, and provide a context for the content.
- Prepare a written outline.
- Organize the content into three or four key points.
- Add detail for each major point.
- Select examples to illustrate the key points.
- If appropriate, present both “sides” of the issue.

### Presentation and Clarity

- Speak loudly and clearly.
- Avoid distracting mannerisms, such as over-use of gestures.
- Provide an introduction; verbally share the outline of the presentation.
- Emphasize key principles and concepts.
- Repeat major points two or three times.
- Stress important points.
- Pause: give the learners time to think.

### Stimulation and Interest

- Be enthusiastic about the content and the audience.
- Start with a question, a problem, a concern or issue that the audience can relate to.
- Be relevant to the needs of the group.
- Use appropriate humor.

### Feedback and Interaction

- Look at your listeners; it is the only way to “engage” them in lecture.
- At the end or periodically, solicit and respond to questions.

In summary, effective lecture can be a powerful and useful teaching technique. The instructor simply needs to be sure that the presentation is more than just standing in front of a group and talking!

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July 2012



# Effective Lecture and Discussion Techniques

## Discussion

Field agents and others who desire to interact more with the audience may prefer using the discussion technique. Discussion is an example of active learning on the part of the participants. Discussion may be the most valuable teaching technique available, for a variety of reasons outlined below (McKeachie, 2006).

### Why Use Discussion

Four reasons for using discussion effectively are related to promoting the instructional objectives of the teaching situation:

- Discussion calls for the use of higher-order cognitive processes.
- Discussion can be used to change attitudes in addition to learning content.
- Discussion can be used effectively in groups to solve problems.
- Discussion helps develop good listening skills, and instructors receive immediate feedback.

### When to Use Discussion

Discussion can be used in a variety of ways within a teaching situation:

- To create interest in the subject when introducing a new subject;
- To add variety, to break up long periods of other techniques such as lecture;
- To prepare learners for a lecture, demonstration or other technique;
- To follow up on a lecture;
- To be used in smaller groups (fewer than 30 participants).

### How to Make Discussion Effective

These suggestions should help the instructor or field agent be more successful in using discussion:

- Outline the objectives for the discussion.
- Start with a question, problem or experience that is common to the group.
- Establish ground rules, such as no one speaks twice until all have had a chance to speak once.
- Create an open environment; be clear that participants are *encouraged* and *expected* to participate.
- Ask a leading question; wait for a response; follow up with additional participant responses and clarifications.
- Summarize the discussion to be sure the key points have been heard.

## Barriers and Concerns

As with any technique, there are some barriers to overcome and some concerns to address. First, most participants have “learned” to be passive over time. Therefore, it may not be easy initially to get participants to engage in discussion. Participants do not want to “look stupid” so they may be reluctant to ask a question. Creating an open environment will help to correct this situation. Participants have also been “trained” to get all the information they need from the instructor. There may be some participants who simply want the instructor to provide all of the answers!

## Discussion vs. Questioning

One final point about discussion involves the comparison with questioning. Questioning is simply the instructor asking a question and allowing for participant responses. The instructor may add to the response or move to another question. Discussion involves the interaction of all participants with each other as well as with the instructor. An effective use of discussion usually means that the participants offer more comments than the instructor. As long as there is a summary of content at the end, the engagement of the participants in a rousing discussion is healthy and productive.

## Reference

McKeachie, W. J., & Svinicki, M. (2006). *Teaching tips* (6<sup>th</sup> edition). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage.

### Summary

Learners learn more when teachers are more effective. Field agents and others must use appropriate teaching techniques, those that fit the participants and those that fit their personal style. Effective lecture is an efficient technique that, when done well, can lead to knowledge gain and increased satisfaction. Effective discussion is less efficient but causes greater participant engagement. Good instructors select the right technique for the content, the audience, and themselves.

**Disclaimer:** This publication was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development, USAID. The content is the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.



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