Participation techniques overview

Introduction

> "Name one of your favorite things about someone in your family."
>
> "If you were an animal, what would you be and why?"
>
> "What award would you love to win and for what achievement?"
>
> —*Some examples of "Good Icebreaker Questions" found on the internet*

This book is not about participation for the sake of participation. Participation is not a feature that we mechanically graft onto an event and check off on a list in an event binder. Including appropriate participation into an event invariably improves the quality and value of the time that attendees are together, by increasing:

- The amount of learning
- The quality of the learning
- The relevance of the learning
- The retention of the learning, in both accuracy and detail
- The fun and enjoyment attendees experience
- The quantity of useful connections among attendees
- The quality of useful connections among attendees
- Attendee engagement at the event
- Attendee satisfaction with the event
- The strength of the event community

Appropriate participation

All too often, session leaders believe that they should "warm-up" the audience with a group participation exercise before broadcasting their content for the remaining allocated time. As a result, most of us have suffered through poorly conceived "icebreakers" at events. Knowing that they are not supposed to begin by sharing large blocks of content with a group of attendees who barely know each other, presenters spend a few minutes looking online or in one of the more than 700 books on "icebreaking activities" listed on Amazon to pick an exercise or two they can drop in to the start of their event. Once the icebreaker is over, the "real" presentation begins.

At best, such practices can reduce nervous expectations in the room, get participants' blood pumping a little faster, and introduce people in a non-threatening way to a few other attendees.

At worst, inappropriate icebreakers can embarrass or infantilize participants, seriously sabotaging the effectiveness of the rest of the session. Unfortunately, this is the more likely outcome. There are good reasons for the attendee groans, the "oh no" facial expressions, and the slow responses to directions the moment an audience realizes an icebreaker is nigh.

Occasional short, playful, physical, interactive exercises are a good way to reengage audience members who are losing focus—which all of us do to some extent after 10 to 20 minutes of uninterrupted lecturing. But such lighthearted games and the dreaded aforementioned icebreakers are not the only ways in which conference attendees can participate in their learning, even though an alien anthropologist might well come to such a conclusion after studying a majority of today's conferences.

In contrast, there is a wealth of effective participatory techniques that can measurably improve the conference learning environment, but are rarely used. In this chapter, I describe the categories I've used to organize the techniques in this compendium, and provide tables that will help you select the right techniques, depending on your goals, session placement in the event, and size of group.

How to use this compendium of techniques

How this compendium is organized

The techniques described in this compendium are organized by *sequence*—that is, when they are most likely to be used during an event. Some techniques, however, resist this categorization, so be sure to review the following sections in this chapter that provide a useful way to quickly discover appropriate techniques based on your *goals*, *conference phase*, and *group size*.

The four broad sequence-based categories of participation techniques in this compendium are:

Techniques for encouraging connection outside conference sessions

Some participation techniques increase participation by adapting, improving, or eliminating features of the conference environment. As such, they are continuously in effect throughout the event. I call

them *white space techniques* to emphasize that they operate whenever participants' attention is not captured by the normal activities at an event.

Openers

Openers are, as you might expect, participation techniques that are especially useful during the early stages of an event. Some openers are appropriate during individual sessions as well, so don't overlook their potential to improve what happens throughout your conference.

Middles

Many participation techniques improve learning, engagement, and connection during core content sessions. I've grouped these techniques into those that facilitate productive *small group discussions*, support effective *voting*, and *create learning opportunities*.

Endings

Ending techniques allow participants to consolidate their learning from a session or an event and assist them, both individually and as a group to move to productive outcomes. These techniques provide effective closure for participants and build community.

Choosing appropriate techniques

Start with your goals for the session or event. *What are the desired outcomes? What important information do you want to convey effectively? Do you want to build connections between participants who don't know each other well? Do you want to uncover useful expertise and experience in the room? Do you want to build a community or a movement—or both? Are there action outcomes that the group needs to decide on?* Being clear about your goals allows you to zero in on techniques that will support them. You'd never use every technique in this book in a single event, so you need to pick what will work for you.

Once you've established your goals, use the tables in the next three sections to review the techniques by goals, conference phase, and group size. Then review the associated chapters for the techniques you find that fit your needs.

Read the whole chapter before making a decision to use the technique. Pay close attention to the *resources* section (see below) to ensure that your meeting environment and available resources can support the time, space, materials, and staff needed.

Preparing to use a technique

Whenever possible, give yourself plenty of time to prepare. While some techniques require little or no preparation, others will need extensive pre-work to use them successfully. If you have never used a technique before, comprehensive review and, ideally, one or more practice run-throughs are especially important, both for your confidence and the quality of participants' resulting experience.

Arrange for all resources to be available when and where they will be needed.

As you review the *how* section of a technique (see below), note any options given and make appropriate choices so you'll know exactly what to do to successfully implement the technique.

How each technique chapter is structured

Each of the technique chapters in this compendium is divided into four sections:

Description

This section provides an overview of the technique, helping you decide whether it's appropriate for the circumstances you have in mind.

When

Some techniques are appropriate throughout an event or session; others are clearly associated with openings, middles, or endings. This section covers the part(s) of an event when a technique is most effective.

Resources

Many of the techniques require low-tech materials resources such as pens, markers, flip chart paper, sticky notes, colored dots, and so on. Others need environmental resources, such as sufficient room space, specific chair arrangements, walls on which materials can be posted, and so on.

How

Here's where you'll learn the details of implementing each technique. Many of these sections include sample narratives that further illustrate how to guide participants through the process.

Techniques by goal

Here are the book's techniques organized by potential goals for your session or event. Many of these techniques are useful for pursuing multiple goals, so you'll find them listed more than once.

Consider the following techniques if you want to . . .

introduce attendees to each other:

Badge It!	Pair Share	Small Group Discussions
Guided Discussions	Pro Action Café	The Solution Room
Human Spectrograms	Roundtable	The Three Questions
Open Space	Seat Swap	World Café

uncover topics of interest to participants:

Anonymous Voting	Plus/Delta	Small Group Discussions
Badge It!	Post It!	The Solution Room
Dot Voting	Pro Action Café	The Three Questions
Fishbowls	Quiz Show	World Café
Open Space	Roundtable	

explore topics and learn from peers:

Affinity Grouping	Open Space	Short Form Presentations:
Body Voting	Pair Share	Pecha Kucha and Ignite
Case Studies and	Plus/Delta	Small Group Discussions
Simulations	Post It!	The Solution Room
Fishbowls	Pro Action Café	The Three Questions
Guided Discussions	Quiz Show	World Café
Human Spectrograms	Roundtable	

evaluate sessions of a conference:

Fishbowls	Human Spectrograms	Plus/Delta
Group Spective	Personal Introspective	Pro Action Café

poll attendees:

Anonymous Voting	Dot Voting	Roman Voting
Body Voting	Hand/Stand Voting	Table Voting
Card Voting	Human Spectrograms	

plan for the future:

Affinity Grouping	Personal Introspective	The Solution Room
Dot Voting	Plus/Delta	
Group Spective	Pro Action Café	

solve problems:

Affinity Grouping	Pair Share	The Solution Room
Guided Discussions	Pro Action Café	World Café

introduce new topics:

Affinity Grouping	Pair Share	Short Form Presentations: Pecha Kucha and Ignite
Badge It!	Plus/Delta	
Guided Discussions	Post It!	The Three Question
Open Space	Roundtable	World Café

Techniques by conference phase

Some exercises work well in more than one conference phase; others are best suited to the start, middle, or end of an event. The following list makes it easy to see what techniques can be used during the different phases of an event.

Openers

Badge It!	Pair Share	The Solution Room
Human Spectrograms	Post It!	The Three Questions
Open Space	Roundtable	World Café

Middles

Affinity Grouping	Fishbowls	Roman Voting
Anonymous Voting	Guided Discussions	Seat Swap
Badge It!	Hand/Stand Voting	Short Form Presentations: Pecha Kucha and Ignite
Card Voting	Human Spectrograms	
Case Studies and Simulations	Open SpacePair Share	Small Group Discussions
	Plus/Delta	Table Voting
Dot Voting	Post It!	World Café

Endings

Fishbowls	Personal Introspective	The Solution Room
Group Spective	Plus/Delta	World Café
Open Space	Pro Action Café	

Techniques by group size

Want to know what participation techniques are appropriate for groups of various sizes? Use Table 28.1 to find out. Read the associated technique chapter for more detailed information.

TABLE 28.1 • *Techniques by group size*

GROUP SIZE	2–8	9–20	21–50	50–100	100+
Affinity Grouping		✓	✓	✓	✓
Anonymous Voting	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Badge It!	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Body Voting	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Card Voting	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Case Studies and Simulations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dot Voting	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fishbowls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Group Spective		✓	✓	✓	✓
Guided Discussions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hand/Stand Voting	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Human Spectrograms	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Open Space		✓	✓	✓	✓
Pair Share	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Personal Introspective	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Plus/Delta	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Post It!	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pro Action Café		✓	✓	✓	✓
Roman Voting	✓	✓	✓		
Roundtable		✓	✓	✓	
Seat Swap	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Short Form Presentations: Pecha Kucha & Ignite	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Small Group Discussions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Table Voting	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The Solution Room		✓	✓	✓	✓
The Three Questions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
World Café		✓	✓	✓	✓

Techniques glossary

I can guarantee there will be at least a few unfamiliar terms in these pages, given that I invented some of them myself. This glossary contains brief definitions; see the relevant chapter or the index for more information.

Affinity Grouping: This technique allows a group to discover and share ideas that arise at a session or conference and group them into categories, so they can be organized and discussed. Sometimes called "cards on the wall."

Anonymous Voting: Any voting method that preserves the anonymity of those voting.

Badge It!: Using participant badges to share useful personal information besides the traditional elements like name, company, etc.

Body Voting: See *Human Spectrograms*.

Card Voting: Provides each participant with an identical set of colored cards that can be used in flexible ways: typically for voting on multiple-choice questions, *consensus voting*, and guiding discussion.

Case Studies and Simulations: Ways to create a classroom or conference environment in which participants can create and explore in a semi-realistic way alternative roles, points of view, puzzles, and positions. Case studies use a story as a jumping-off place for group analysis and discussion, while simulations immerse participants into an experiential situation.

Conference Arc: An approach to design that concentrates on event chronological parts—openers, middles, and endings—and the consequential progressive experience of participants.

Consensus voting: Voting techniques that gauge the degree of group consensus on a point of view or course of action.

Continuum Voting: See *Human Spectrograms*.

Dot Voting: A technique for public *semi-anonymous* voting in which participants are given identical sets of one or more colored paper dots that they stick onto paper voting sheets to indicate preferences.

Fishbowls: Provide group process that facilitates focused discussion, either by assuring that the conversation at any moment is restricted to a few clearly defined people or by allowing representatives of both sides of a point of view time in turn to listen to and question representatives of the opposing viewpoint.

Group Spectives: Closing conference sessions that provide time for attendees to collectively take stock, reflecting on where they started, the path traveled, and the journey yet to come.

Guided Discussions: Guided small discussion groups used regularly during a session to expose different answers, viewpoints, and levels of understanding and create multiple simultaneous rich customized learning environments in the room.

Hand/Stand Voting: In hand voting, participants raise their hands to indicate their answer to a question with two or more possible answers. Stand voting replaces hand raising with standing.

Human Graphs: See *Human Spectrograms*.

Human Spectrograms: Also known as *body voting*, *continuum voting*, and *human graphs*. A form of *public voting* that has participants move in the room to a place that represents their answer to a question. Human spectrograms can be categorized as *one-dimensional*, *two-dimensional*, or *state-change*.

One-dimensional Human Spectrograms: *Human Spectrograms* in which participants position themselves along a line in a room to portray their level of agreement/disagreement with a statement or a numeric response (e.g., the number of years they've been in their current profession).

Open Space: A simple method for participants to create their own meetings.

Openers: Participation techniques that are especially useful during the early stages of a group's time together.

Pair Share: Discussion of a topic or question with a partner during a session that develops and reinforces learning.

Participatory Voting: Any form of voting that provides public information about viewpoints in the room and paves the way for further discussion.

Personal Introspectives: Two-part closing conference sessions that guide participants through a review of what they have learned and a determination of what they want to consequently change in their lives.

Plus/Delta: A review tool that enables participants to quickly identify what went well at a session or event and what could be improved.

Post It!: A simple technique that uses participant-written sticky notes to uncover topics and issues that a group wants to discuss.

Pro Action Café: A blend of *World Café* and *Open Space* that facilitates reflection, discussion and consolidation of ideas, and moving to action.

Public Voting: Voting methods that allow a group to see the individuals who have voted and how they voted.

Roman Voting: Roman Voting is a *public voting* technique for gauging the strength of consensus.

Roundtables: Structured conference *openers* that employ *The Three Questions to (*1) define and model an active, interactive, and safe conference environment; (2) provide a structured forum for attendees to meet and learn about each others' affiliations, interests, experience, and expertise; and (3) uncover the topics that people want to discuss and share.

Seat Swap: A strategy for switching seats during a seated meal to increase conversational partners.

Semi-anonymous voting: Voting techniques in which others can only determine how individuals vote by watching them closely during the voting process.

Short Form Presentations Pecha Kucha and Ignite: Very short stylized presentations that offer a rapid introduction to a topic, an idea, or an experience and that act as a jumping-off place for stimulated viewers to start learning more via engagement afterwards.

Small Group Discussions: Techniques that use small groups to improve learning, connection, interaction, and engagement.

State-change Human Spectrograms: *Human Spectrograms* in which participants move en masse from one point to another to display a change of some quantity (e.g., opinion, geographical location) over time.

Table Voting: A technique used for polling attendees on their choice from predetermined answers to a multiple-choice question, and/or for dividing participants into preference groups for further discussions or activities.

The Solution Room: An opening or closing conference session that engages and connects attendees and provides peer-supported advice on their most pressing problems.

The Three Questions: An opener that supports and encourages a group of people in learning about each other, their wishes for the time they are together, and their relevant experience and expertise.

Two-dimensional Human Spectrograms: *Human Spectrograms* in which participants position themselves in a two-dimensional room space to display relative two-dimensional information (e.g., where they live with reference to a projected map).

World Café: A format for dialogue in small groups around questions that have been determined in advance.