

## ALTERNATIVE LEARNING FORMATS

Budget-friendly nontraditional formats to boost recall, integrate fun and engagement, enable knowledge-sharing, respect learning styles, engage introverts and first-timers, leverage neuroscience/learning behavior research, and mix things up.

Associations can pull from myriad learning formats to introduce content in a fun, compelling, and effective way. Here are some nontraditional education and engagement formats that ASAE or its member organizations or allies have tried successfully in recent years.

Some are better for small meetings; others for mid-size or large meetings. Many of the small-group formats can—with tweaks—also be scaled to accommodate larger groups.

Some are especially geared to engage introverts or first-timers, as well as diverse varieties of learners. This is not an all-inclusive list by any means! Certain formats such as flip learning aren't on here because they are better known, even though they may not be common within association educational offerings. Not every session needs to be an alternative learning format; plenty of people like panels and sit-and-gets. The key is offering a blend so people can choose their own learning and experience preferences.

**“Playgrounds,” “Touch-Me Tanks” or “Petting Zoos:”** Hands-on, try-it-yourself experiential formats in which attendees experiment with new things (apps, 3-D printed items, whatever innovations). Playgrounds usually have people available to explain how to “play” with something like apps or items; ASAE does a technology playground at several conferences. Petting zoos are often “self-tours” that let people touch different things like different types of sustainable papers and ink treatments (they are labeled tabletop set-ups separated with velvet aisle ropes to create “stalls or pens” that people enter to do the touching.

Touch-Me Tanks are the same—people literally put their hand in a fish tank or bowl and take out something to feel, handle, play with something like a drone or new type of gadget or product. Helpful signage using the language of aquariums, for instance, (“The best habitat for X is in a workplace that needs staff to instantly communicate with each other or members. It has a

life expectancy of 3 years before its evolution to the next being; it can grow as large as 128 gigabytes....”) is on the tables or tanks. Fun and inexpensive. A good way to move people around to boost energy and to provide memorable experiential learning. Studies show that physical touching increases recall of the learning concept or fact considerably.

**“Marketplaces”**—Set up like farmers’ markets with distinct set-ups of mini-presentations such as for ideas or award program winners. Attendees walk around the perimeter of the room [market] to “shop” for the best takeaways for themselves. You can give them a “grocery list” identifying all the stalls so they can check-off which ones they want to visit during their session (this also reminds them of who is the contact or organization offering the idea or item). These can also be used at large receptions, giving people something to do informally as they drink, eat and mingle. Great for engaging introverts, first-timers, and networking-haters at receptions because this whittles down the reception size into segmented sections [stalls], so there is something targeted to discuss and explore, while also promoting movement.

**Micro-coaching**—one-on-one or very small- group targeted learning/troubleshooting. Extremely popular. Good for introverts, first-timers, emerging leaders, embarrassed veterans who want fairly private help, people who learn better one-on-one. Topics can include everything from how to get the most from your iPhone’s digital camera, to how to properly shake hands, to how to present complicated ideas visually.

**Discussion Dens:** 20-minute themed conversations with no set speaker, just a facilitator, in a relaxed, fun, living-room set-up for 2-10 people (although ASAE had more at nearly all of its six pilot dens at Great Ideas 2015). These are usually run during breaks between sessions at a conference, and people can get their coffee, join the den for 20 minutes, and then get to their next session within the 30 minute break period. Doesn’t work well if in a large facility where people need to hike it a ways, but small venue meetings are ideal. You can run a single den during break or several. Placement in a high-traffic area is a good idea, but be careful not to put the set-up near anything loud like a fountain or a big serving area.

**Speed-Date Formats:** Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), for instance, is using this in a one-hour conference session in 2015. Its topic is

on creating and integrating sustainability into a business travel program. Experts are seated at each table, and attendees spread out and move from one table to another at a set pace (depending on length of session time) to learn how to start down the green path, best practices, how to communicate the policy, and measurement and reporting. Build in time for physical movement so don't overbook the number of experts used.

**Shootouts:** Another GBTA format in 2015. Ten attendees on a first-come, first-serve basis take the center-room mic and "tell us their story" and real-world opinions in 3-5 minutes around a specified industry topic or challenge. An industry panel discussion and case study follow. Having attendees share first, not after speakers, allows for a more customized response from panelists, gets the audience involved early in rapid-sharing storytelling, ensures content is highly practical in application or raises questions from the grassroots level, and gives many people a chance to participate and share different perspectives.

**Meetups:** Real-time spontaneous learning groups formed in the moment, often spot-organized via Twitter or text. Small-group, peer-to-peer learning, usually no main speaker, unscripted content. Not recorded. Best to reserve a certain Meetup space ahead of time and then anyone can sign up to use it on a first-come, first-serve basis.

**Flash Learning or Pop-up Learning Station:** Reserved area for when people want to create an instant session or repeat a popular session that not everyone was able to attend.

**Conversation Bistros:** Bar-table sessions for intimate peer-to-peer learning of 2-3 people. Have topic cards on the tables to start conversation or to focus on one topic but offer blank signs so people can post their own bistro topic. These are staffed, quiet-talking zones. They can run between sessions or be separately scheduled blocks of time. Good for introverts, overwhelmed first-timers, exhausted attendees, reflective attendees.

**"Concentration Zones," "Reflection Zones," or "Un-engagement Lounge:"** These are like self-driven labs in which you take what you've learned or talked about in other sessions and spend time writing or thinking about how it can be applied to you and your organization. It is meant to be

like a mini-retreat in the midst of a conference, and these are quiet zones, sometimes with no cell phone usage allowed or with the phone silenced. Staffed and roped off in an open area to enforce quiet rules but segmented from the main area. Can be sponsored.

**30-minute Express Learning:** “Spot” Learning or “snap learning” sessions have 1-2 speakers and a small group of under 30 or so. ASAE allows sponsorship of these intimate, nicely designed speaking areas. Very popular at ASAE events. Scheduled simultaneously with regular sessions and remain in the same spot throughout the event. Can do them back-to-back as a series, perhaps with themes such as “career development” or “ideas that worked” or “troubleshooting sessions.”

**Alternative experiential:** These might include everything from a parade of ideas (literally, a line of people holding a photo/symbol/text about an idea that they then parade up to a microphone and share in 1 minute or 30 seconds before the next participant marches up—background music is great, balloons, popcorn for the crowd), to a “runway” in which concepts are walked down a red carpet for presenting/judging and fun but informative commentary, to a hands-on scientific experiment (ASAE’s “Science of Innovation” session at Great Ideas 2015 involved extracting strawberry DNA experiment while speaker taught how to apply scientific hypotheses testing techniques to testing of business ideas).

**Design thinking:** A problem is presented to an audience, which breaks into small groups and answers specific questions designed to solve it or address it, and may include speed proto-typing. Example: Target asking NetImpact how to convince customers to use reusable totes, or Protector & Gamble asking for marketing guidance on getting Millennial moms to recycle items in the bathroom like shampoo bottles. Great for promoting critical thinking skills, engaging people in rapid learning and idea-sharing, small-group learning, multi-generational innovation, energizing, rapid feedback. Prizes for “best of” can add to the edginess.

**Conversations That Matter or “Conversations of Consequence”:** Facilitated, large- or mid-size group discussions on a theme or problem, no PPTs or specific takeaways. Preferred to have no technology devices such as phone/iPads so that all can concentrate on the conversation. A safe forum to debate and discuss areas of disagreement, confusion, strong emotion (like D&I), current events/news, and “what this might mean for our

industry/profession.” Good facilitation important. Can seed audience with a few commentators to get conversation going.

**Author series**—A chance for book authors to share highlights from their works in a non-salesy, learning-oriented and interactive way. Often followed up by a book signing. These can be sponsored, too. A “Book Nook” for the speakers gives it an easy-to-recall location and theme for attendees. Nice for small groups but it can be for any size, depending on the prestige/draw factor of the authors.

**Hackathons/Rapid-prototyping/Connectathons/Iconathons:** Examples building/design associations’ joint hackathon to create a sustainability logo in Raleigh, Florida Game Development Association does one annually around boosting education (latest was on promoting STEM careers) or workforce skills.

**Twitterfest/Twitterchat/Tweet-and-Greets/Tweetorials:** Twitter-based chats on a topic that is usually hosted by a moderator perhaps with a special guest so folks can tweet questions. Or it can be a general tweet chat based on questions the moderators throws out to the virtual group. Tweetorials are virtual micro-coaching on things like how to use Twitter, new apps that help with something and how to use them, whatever how-to is needed. They can be pre-scheduled or organized on the spot by an organization or attendee. Some put these on the tradeshow floor with giant screens so people browsing around or eating can watch the thread live.

**Lounge-based micro-sessions** (15 minutes each): National Assn of Secondary Principals does this on its tradeshow floor and “sells” that time and physical location to exhibitors, who want to educate rather than pitch. Builds exhibitors’ reputations for expertise and personability/trust while exposing attendees to new products, processes or trends (trends are popular—like Top 5 Reasons to Move to the Cloud).

**Networking Salons**—see my separate how-to description and photos

**Speed Solos**—NetImpact, an association of MBA grads and young corporate professionals who use business to create positive social change, created and tested this format. A series of 8-minute PPT presentations around a common theme (ex: how to move into the CEO slot, how to create a new product development strategy). Each PPT ends with the speaker

asking a question that prompts a 4-minute table discussion. The tables are set for 10, and all are asked to introduce themselves by name, title, and organization in the first 5 minutes of the session. After all presentations, the group can either invite questions to the panel of speakers from a center-floor mic or invite tables to do a “flashback” to an earlier conversation that they want to continue. Fast-moving, easy set-up. Forces speakers to narrowly focus on the best takeaway knowledge since they only have 8 minutes. Good for large-group settings while giving the feel of small-group peer learning.

**Walking for Wisdom or “Wisdom Walkabouts”:** Paired or small-group sets of individuals who are meet in one spot and then unite or pair up to go stroll a set route and discuss a certain question or topic. Sometimes there is a group discussion afterward; otherwise, it’s just a one-on-one peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing experience.

**“Brainiac Biking:”** Small groups of attendees bike from learning spot to learning spot along a trail or in a park or in quiet city areas where they won’t block traffic. Usually 4 learning stations let people stop, drink water or lemonade, and get a 10-12 minute talk on a topic from a casually dressed or even funny-dressed speaker. The one Kristin Clarke has done was in Portland, Ore., on a rail-trail (flat, straight, so easy) about onboarding for new CEOs. The learning spots focused on onboarding with the board president, onboarding with your senior team, onboarding with major donors, and onboarding with the membership. Fun, physically engaging but not hard. Great way to take advantage of pretty environments, disrupt the usual sit-and-get schedule, and improve memory recall of attendees.

**Safaris, “Study Abroads,” “and other field-trip-like mini experiences** (Edu-tours but themed or experiential rather than just listening to a tour guide—call me for explanation). Similar example: Bring in example of something to tour such as arrange a visit by the “Catastrophe Bus” of the American Red Cross to show how decision-making is made in crisis situations.

**360- or in-the-round sessions:** As it sounds. Engages attendees by circling the speaker(s) like a corral. Speaker moves around. Feels intimate. Speakers should be trained in this.

**Outside-In Learning:** Sessions that pull knowledge from industries/professions outside of that of the association. Examples: corporate or government lessons that may resonate for assns.

**Debates/Socrates** sessions

**The-Doctor-Is-In “Office Hours” or “Solution Rooms”:** Live problem-solving and feedback from prominent coach/consultant/association leader in a large, small or micro group setting

**Service learning** (CSR combined with learning)

Role-playing or **improvisation-based** learning session

**Lightning Sessions:** Three 20-minute mini-sessions, usually by different speakers, in a 1-hour themed session. Example: Moving to the CEO Spot—rounds might be “Negotiating Your First CEO Contract,” “Working with Headhunting Firms,” “Mastering the CEO-Board Interview”.

**Ignites**-trademarked. 15 slides with 20 seconds each at a set cadence and other rules.

**Pecha Kucha**—20 slides auto-change for 6 minutes total

**Talk-show Panels**/Interview style

**Gamifications/simulations**—Examples: “Best Gadget Standing” by Consumer Electronics Association, hackathons by Florida Video Game Developers Association.

**Contests**—live judging of pre-submitted materials or real-time competitions onsite or “just the finals” events that culminate in a learning expertise or event. Example: OWAA, Florida Photographers Assn

**Story slams:** See The Moth guidelines at [www.themoth.org](http://www.themoth.org).

**Speed coaching**/networking

**“Needs and Wants”** format (also known as **Reciprocity Circles** a la Adam Grant)

**Shark Tank and other live pitching** (for grants, idea prioritizing, etc.). Can combine with crowdsourcing, crowdfunding, live polling, etc.

**Crowdsourced Real-time Learning:** Speakers come ready to present on two or three topics, and the audience in the room votes as to which one they want to hear.

**Master Class:** Speaker(s) is usually a recognized expert in a certain topic. Level of learning is directed at very experienced professionals who want to know more or to expand their skills.

**Game Changer:** Speaker is someone who has disrupted a profession or industry through innovation.

**No-host dinner parties** and other meal-based, out-of-the-conference-center learning events grounded in peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing. NetImpact is one of several organizations that hold these on one or more nights of its conference. Attendees sign up by interest area and are grouped into 10s. They're directed to a certain restaurant and usually have paid a flat rate for dinner ahead of time through the association or CVB. Attendees simply talk about whatever they want related to the theme of the table.

**Sunrise or Sunset (“Insomniac”) Sessions** – early morning or late evening short sessions, perhaps with a physical element such as yoga, spinning, meditation, etc. For “insomnia sessions,” the focus appears to be on “takeaway-away sharing of the day,” mindfulness, or self-care (stress management, finding a life coach, time management, nutrition for leaders)

**Traditional:**

**Posters**--A room in which small displays are set up for on-your-own rotational idea-sharing, research-sharing, whatever-sharing but with one individual leading each small station and the attendee choosing the ones he/she wants to visit. Usually these are curated ahead of time to ensure quality, but it could be interesting to do a “pop-up poster session.”

**Town Halls**



**Panel**

**Deep Dives**