

Create New Knowledge with This Quick, Easy, No-Fuss-No-Muss, Surefire Method
Theory-of-Change Symposium
indisputably.org/2020/01/theory-of-change-symposium-part-5-and-coming-attractions/
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[John Lande](#) describes how you can create valuable knowledge by systematically eliciting responses from audiences in your educational programs. He is the Isidor Loeb Professor Emeritus at the University of Missouri School of Law.

Have you always wanted to be a font of knowledge? Impress your friends and colleagues? Be the life of the party with amazing new information?

Well, I have just the ticket for you. It's yours absolutely free! No shipping or handling charges. (Sorry, we're all out of the ginsu knives that used to come along with this amazing offer.)

All it takes is an invitation to speak with some sentient adults.

For example, will you be a presenter at a continuing education program? A speaker at a conference? A lecturer in a school or class?

If your audience has experience or knowledge relevant to the topic of your program, you can collect and disseminate it. For example, you can ask what do people really do in practice. What makes sense to them – or not – about dealing with particular problems? Do they use any nifty techniques you haven't thought of? Have they noticed any changes in practice over time? What are their hopes and aspirations? How much do people use dispute resolution theory in practice? What are some problems with the theory? How do they deal with these problems?

This is different than the typical practice of leaving a few minutes for questions from the audience at the end of a presentation.

Instead, you devote a fair bit of time to ask specific questions of the audience that you plan in advance. You might do this at the beginning, middle, and/or end of a program. For example, at the beginning of a program, you might ask a series of questions about people's background and experience, soliciting answers by a show of hands. This not only helps you gear your presentation to the audience, but it helps everyone get a feel for how their experience compares with the others in the room.

At various times during a program, after you discuss some material, you can ask the audience about the topic you just discussed. You might invite people to respond with verbal comments, a show of hands, or even responses to survey questions using “clickers” or cell phones. After discussion of the question, you can proceed to the next part of the presentation and elicit more input if you like.

The result is that you enrich the educational process for everyone by including insights from the audience.

To get the full benefit, you should arrange for someone to take notes of the discussion on a laptop. If students will be in the audience, you might arrange for one of them to take notes. Here are [simple instructions for using notetakers](#).

You might make an audio or video recording but you may have a hard time picking up comments from people who are far from the microphone, so don't rely solely on these recordings. In any case, you should let the audience know that you are making a record of the discussion.

After a presentation, prepare materials to distribute to the audience (and perhaps others). You might weave the notes into a short document similar to a magazine article or blog post, adding your own comments and additional resources. A simpler alternative is just to distribute a straightforward summary.

If you are presenting at a continuing education program, your host may arrange to email your summary to the participants and/or post it on its website. If you present at a conference, you can circulate a sheet for people to provide their legible email addresses, which you can use to distribute the summary.

You could use the audience responses as data in a publication. (If you are an academic and your publication is considered as human subjects research, you should get approval from your school's Institutional Review Board.)

Yeah, But Is It Real Knowledge?

You bet.

There are common myths that information isn't real “scientific knowledge” unless it is collected in a survey with a large number of respondents – and that survey data validly represents reality.

Everyone should carefully consider what inferences you can make from any data. Although [survey data often presents a useful window on the world, there are many reasons why it may present a flawed view](#). Survey data about dispute resolution is especially tricky because there are so many contextual variables that affect the conclusions that it is [hard to make strong generalizations](#).

You also should be cautious about making generalizations based on data from educational programs. Indeed, if you elicit responses from only a few people in a haphazard way, this wouldn't produce generalizations you can rely on. Even if you are more systematic and thorough, generalizations should be limited to the population represented in the audience.

But making generalizations isn't the only – or necessarily the most important – goal of empirical research. [Other goals](#) include developing clearer concepts and language, identifying key contextual factors affecting processes, developing new theories and insights, helping establish consensus on best and worst practices, and helping design conflict management systems.

By asking questions at educational programs, you can learn new ideas and perspectives that you hadn't considered. This can change the way that you and others look at the world and the questions that you ask. So you won't produce definitive answers, but you and your audience can learn good questions to ask in the future.

What a concept.

Just Do It

This ain't rocket surgery. You can do it.

Hell, considering all the effort you invest into preparing educational presentations, it needn't take much more to collect and disseminate data from your programs.

Here are examples of knowledge generated from a [short CLE program](#), a [two-day mediation training](#), [multiple conference sessions](#), and a [class presentation](#).

Act now. Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back!