School of Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education

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Design and Develop Handouts

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Handouts are a common accompaniment to lectures, small group sessions, seminars and other educational events. They can also be designed to act as patient information sheets, detailing clinical procedures or providing health education messages. They need to be designed so that they are relevant, readily accessible to the reader and written in a way that will engage and inform. Handouts should capture the key points of the talk, without being too comprehensive, their aim is to assist the learner, not replace the text book. A further reading list is a very useful inclusion in a handout as are interactive elements that will stimulate the application and integration of new knowledge.

Handouts can be considered in terms of four basic types, each of which has a particular purpose and function.

What is the purpose of the handout?

The handout may:

1. Provide an outline of the information you are delivering, providing a framework for the lecture or seminar with space for the user to add their own notes during the session.

2. The material may be designed such that it promotes interaction with the student. This format might include scenarios for discussion, diagrams or questions, all of which could form the basis for individual or group activities during a seminar, workshop or even during a lecture.

3. The handout could contain supplementary information which has not been presented during the formal teaching session. This could be a set of references for further reading or some information which is intended to amplifying what has been presented during the session and which allows the learner to develop the concepts further, or to integrate this new information into the knowledge that they have already assimilated.

4. It may be desirable to provide a handout that contains a full transcript of the lecture. This could be available to allow the learner to engage in active listening, giving the speaker their full attention, without the distraction of having to make notes. But this is rarely a good use of a handout.

Whilst types 1 & 2 are usually given out at the beginning types 3 & 4 can be given out either before or after the lecture or other teaching session. Handouts given out at the end of the lecture are often collected, filed away and never used again. It is, however, a commonly used technique to tell the audience that a handout will be given at the end in an attempt to ensure that they concentrate on what is being said rather than making notes during the lecture or demonstration. Unfortunately this often does not work. Learners may feel comforted by the fact that they have a comprehensive set of notes and may then loose concentration during the lecture, filing the notes later without having assimilated any of the information presented in either format (see Problems later) and it is better to give the handout at the beginning both to cue the listener into what will be discussed, but also to allow those who wish to annotate the notes such that the learning is personalised and therefore more meaningful.

Content

Handouts are not the place to be long winded. They are meant to be concise and clear and they are certainly not intended to be a textbook in miniature. The language used should be straightforward and readily accessible with clearly defined learning outcomes.

Jargon should be avoided wherever possible and any unusual terms, or words that are likely to be new to the learner should be clearly defined in the handout.

Handouts should be designed such that are used as a prompt for the learners, allowing them to reflect on the focus of the session topic. In addition they can be regarded as a stimulus for deeper exploration of a topic and as an aid to revision.

There is little point in simply repeating what can be found in any standard text, offering exemplars, linking theories to practice and including activities that can enhance learning. Providing the learner with a list of further reading with brief comments on the value of each reference is often useful and offering links to other related areas for further reading can be really valuable in prompting additional exploration of the topic.

To prevent handouts being filed and forgotten make sure that you promote their use by referring to specific aspects of the handout frequently during the lecture or seminar. Encourage the learners to annotate them if they so wish since such personalisation will increase the usefulness to the individual.

Include some questions in the handout. Interactive handouts will stimulate the learner and require them to engage in active learning. Incorporating a quiz, or providing a case will allow the learners to rehearse their new knowledge and consider it in the context of their own practice.

Consider distributing your handouts prior to the teaching session to provide an 'advance organiser'. This will prompt the learners to think about the topics and the areas of the subject matter to be covered before they attend the session. This advance organiser format can also incorporate some personalised tasks for the student to undertake in preparation for the session. If given out during an earlier teaching session, they can act as an advertisement for the following sessions. This will enable the lecturer to provide links with prior knowledge as well as developing links between the different aspects of the material covered in the session.

Layout

The handout should look attractive and be easy to read. Solid blocks of text will turn off all but the rare enthusiast or the pedant. Organise the material in a clear way, indicating at the beginning the contents of the handout. Use headings to provide a clear direction through the contents and mix in graphics or sample diagrams if appropriate.

The typeface used must be legible. Avoid fancy fonts and use one at least 9 point in size. No more than 2 typefaces should be used in any handout. Avoid the widespread use of capital letters – they are more difficult to read than lower case. Flow charts or algorithms may help clarify difficult topics. Remember that the white space on a page is an important part of the design, you need to consider how it can be used effectively to ensure that the message receives the prominence that it deserves. If you have access to colour printing this will make your handout stand out and can be used to highlight important points.

With widespread use of 'Microsoft Power point' there has been a tendency for lecturers to simply use the handouts function in the software to print out copies of their slides. If this is used avoid the 6 slides per page format so that space is provided for the student to add notes. But remember that this technique, though quick and easy for the lecturer, may not fulfil the purposes you wish for the handout. Your slides may be fine but they serve a different function from a handout.

Problems

Handouts distributed at the beginning of a teaching session often distract the audience who spend the next few minutes reading them and thus miss the speakers' words. If you intend to distribute the handout at the beginning of the session then give the audience a short time to glance through the handout to assess its contents. They can then decide whether they need to annotate it during the session or can concentrate on the oral presentation.

A useful variation is the use of a staggered (or drip feed) handout. This consists of separate sections of a complete handout distributed at appropriate moments during the teaching session. The audience can then read the small amount given and are not distracted by the whole handout. The disadvantage is the time and disruption taken up by the repeated distribution of the sections.

One possible problem of the use of handouts if that they may promote passive learning. This can be overcome by including activities or interaction in you use of handouts.

Copyright

Beware of breaching copyright by simply copying material produced by others. For instance making multiple copies of material from textbooks, other people's handouts etc. and distributing this as a handout is usually a breach of copyright and makes you liable to prosecution – it is also a form of intellectual plagiarism, and lazy. The act of producing your own handouts helps to structure your teaching session and is a useful educational exercise in its own right.

The position of copying from material published on the web is less clear but the copyright authorities believe that copyright law applies to material published on the web in the same way as material published in paper form.

In every case where you use other people's words, diagrams or ideas the authorship should be acknowledged. If in doubt ask a librarian – they are usually well informed about copy-right issues.

Remember for many learners – a carefully filed handout can suggest they know a topic, while a highlighted and then filed copy suggests some degree of expertise in the topic – consider some creative ways to check the level of your learners engagement with and understanding of the topics that you are delivering to ensure that there is not merely a transference of information from handout to file.

Further Reading

Hayes, T.M. (1999) *Instrumental Text 5th edn,* Occasional paper, Cardiff: School of Postgraduate Studies, UWCM

Lockwood, F. (1992) *Activities in Self-Instructional Texts,* London: Kogan Page.

Maclean, I. (1991) *Twelve tips on producing handouts.* Medical Teacher 13:7-12.

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