

The lost art of lab meetings

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Lab: colloquial for “laboratory” - a room or building fitted out for scientific experiments, research, teaching. Meeting: an assembly of people for discussion or entertainment (The Concise Oxford Dictionary – 9th Edition)

Lab... Meeting... Put them together in a psychology department and what do you get? An assembly of academically inclined individuals discussing research and/or entertaining each other. Lab meetings can take many forms. But one thing seems clear, there are a number of benefits of participation. We surveyed graduate students at the University of British Columbia and here's what they had to say about positive aspects of such meetings...

Communication and Collaboration

Lab meetings provide:

- an opportunity to share your own research as well as learn more about what your colleagues are doing.
- a venue for practicing presentation skills and providing and receiving constructive feedback in a supportive environment.
- a forum for communication about current progress, upcoming events and collaborative efforts.

Learning and Teaching - the fundamentals of education

In lab meetings, you can:

- gain exposure to interesting research findings, theories, methodologies, etc.
- discuss recent articles, which promotes critical thinking and helps students to understand difficult concepts
- work through issues aloud and use colleagues as “sounding boards”
- receive feedback on one's own research
- capitalize on the unique strengths of individuals in your lab (one member may be theoretically inclined while another is a stats wizard)

Guidance/Supervision

- Lab meetings make good use of your advisor's valuable, and no doubt limited, time. It is best to share him/her when you can (e.g., discussing research problems common to everyone) so she/he will have more time for you when you really need individual attention (e.g., detailed comments on a manuscript).

Motivation, Inspiration and Stimulation

- Students report that regular lab meetings help keep their projects on track. Lab meetings motivate some students to have news to report. Others are inspired and stimulated by the ideas and discussion generated.

Social aspects

- Socializing with peers and those with similar academic interests, bonding as a

group, building an identity as a lab and having fun are important.

What? Students who have never been to a lab meeting?

Despite the many positive aspects of lab meetings, there are many students who do not engage in these meetings on a regular basis. On top of the classic obstacles (e.g., “no time”, “too busy”, “no one to organize them”), the introduction of email as a fast and convenient means to facilitate communication has diminished face to face contact between students and supervisors. A multitude of reasons lead many students work from home/off campus rather than school (e.g., save \$ on transportation; home computer access; shared, cramped, windowless offices with orange furniture from the 70’s are not features in everybody’s ideal working environment).

So where does this leave the lab meeting? Will lab meetings become obsolete? We suggest that students have the power to keep the spirit of lab meetings alive. Now, more than ever before, students have to advocate for real, live training. But why should we? Who cares? Well, although we love email as much as the next geek, a study in *American Psychologist* (Kraut et al., 1998) indicated that greater use of the Internet leads to shrinking social support and increases in depression and loneliness. Plus, you can’t share cookies over the Internet. We encourage you to consider the positive features of lab meetings and to advocate for live lab meetings as part of your grad school experience. Whether you plan to initiate meetings or are already a veteran attendee, you might benefit from the tips on organizing and making the most out of lab meetings listed below.

Tips for Great Lab Meetings

Organization

Unfortunately, lab meetings do not organize themselves. One person should take charge of organizing the meetings for a period of at least one semester; responsibility can be delegated to others in the lab as long as follow-through is ensured. Remember to keep meetings:

- on track - one way of facilitating this process is to have an agenda
- research-oriented (e.g., negotiate interpersonal issues privately)
- focused on the positive (e.g., encourage people to talk about their accomplishments and provide positive as well as constructive feedback).

Scheduling

If you want your supervisor to attend, pick a time that is convenient for him or her. Ideally, it is best to have the meetings at the same time. On the other hand, if the meeting times do not fit with everyone’s schedules, you might want to shake up your line-up so that all lab members can attend some of the time. Some folks like to schedule meetings at lunch, while others prefer early mornings or late afternoons to accommodate individuals who may have commitments during regular business hours. Whatever time you choose, stick to it for a long enough period to get an idea of whether it is working or not. If it is not, try a different time. Schedule a time for the meeting to start and finish. One to 1.5 hours seems to be the average time. One UBC student observed that most of the important decisions in her lab occurred during the last 3 minutes!

Frequency

First, decide how often you want to have lab meetings (e.g., weekly, monthly). This will depend on the size of your lab and your schedules. You want to meet regularly enough so that lab meetings are part of your routine and you do not schedule other things during that time slot. Sometimes it can be better to schedule meetings on an as needed basis instead.

Format/Content

Now that you have got the members of your lab gathered together in one place, what do you do? Ask potential participants what they would like to gain from meetings. With this input, you can create a collaborative environment and increase participation and commitment. You do not have to have all lab meetings in the same format – sometimes you might like to have more formal meetings where someone busts out the projector or overhead and presents research. Other times you may simply wish to chat about recent developments in your field. While supervisors often have a preference for certain styles of meetings (e.g., round table discussions, research presentations), students should also offer alternatives (e.g., journal club). Remember, variety is the spice of life. Don't forget to include some social meetings too! You want to make the meetings productive AND fun to ensure continuing attendance.

PR – Public Relations

Now that you've decided on a time and format for lab meetings, get the word out! Send out reminders by email or phone for each meeting (YES, for each meeting), and e-mail them again the day before the meeting (they may have forgotten). Post a schedule in the lab in a prominent place. Be persistent - don't give up! It might take lab meetings a while to catch on. If you can

bring food, this also helps. If this is a meeting where a lot of ideas are to be generated, email a list of questions/ideas ahead of time so people can come prepared. Conversely, if many ideas are put forth, you might want to send out a summary after the meeting. Some people produce recorded “minutes” of the meeting, while others prefer a global summary or nothing at all.

Overcoming Obstacles

How to encourage attendance and participation

- Have your supervisor endorse and attend the lab meetings. Supervisor's expectations (aka guilt trips) were listed as a significant motivator for meeting attendance. However, do not be discouraged if your supervisor is too busy to come. Students commented that having regularly scheduled, student attended lab meetings was worthwhile, facilitating peer learning and mentoring, and, in some cases, eventual faculty attendance.
- Food at meetings was listed as an incentive/reward for attendance.
- Make your lab meetings interesting, productive and fun– then people will want to come.
- Be well organized and stay on task.
- Involve people – if they are presenting research or an article, they will likely show up and get something out of the meeting.

Tips on making the most out of lab meetings. DO – “The 3 P's”

Prepare

- do readings ahead of time
- make a list of things that you want to talk about

Participate

- ask questions if you don't understand something (if you're wondering about it, probably other people are too)
- share your views - if you have something to add to the discussion SAY IT. Meetings are usually held to inform AND get feedback.
- offer your own opinion on topics you would like to cover
- come with ideas and questions for discussion... or at least come with attentive ears and be ready to contribute whatever you can.
- be bold, be controversial! (but of course, also be respectful and supportive)

Present

- remember, you have a lot to gain by presenting your research or an article for discussion

Perhaps the biggest piece of advice for making lab meetings work is also the simplest: “ATTEND!!!!” Often students think that no one else will be there or they have nothing to contribute, but in fact each person making an effort to go can make the meeting successful. In answer to the question, “Will lab meetings become obsolete?” – our answer is, only if we let them.

Melanie Badali is a doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of British Columbia. She is currently working on her doctoral dissertation, which examines influences of psychosocial factors on pain responses. She recently received the 2002 CPA Health Section Student Research Award. Melanie is the new student representative for the CPA Health Section. After completing her PhD, she aspires to continue research and practice in the area of health psychology.