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Slicing through the onion: Contrasting perspectives on a recent academic event

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What makes a symposium successful? That question is not unlike an onion, since so many layers of analysis are possible. To a large extent, the answers depend on how we slice. Success in a short-term business view may not translate as success from a long-term educational perspective. When considering the success of any educational endeavor, it is necessary to think about the time frame involved. The impact of an academic conference should not be measured only by how people feel walking out of the door immediately after the event. That offers a useful snapshot, but to obtain a better picture we should also consider what effect – if any – the convocation had months after the event is over.

This paper contrasts two paradigms of academic conferences, then some impressions of a recent conference by Toyo University's Institute of Human Sciences. The article concludes with three suggestions for future academic events.

Keywords: conference planning, symposia, learning theory, organizing academic events, presentation analysis

Today we are accustomed to regard symposia as sober academic affairs. However, in ancient Greece they could better be described as "rambling banquet parties" (Makedon, 1995, sec. 47). In the Hellenic world, men from noble families were periodically invited to symposia (Συμπόσιο), and such events featured extensive discussion, drinking, and convivial carousing. This social institution was later adopted by the Etruscans and Romans. The symposia of antiquity were likely discursive. In other words, instead of listening to extended lectures and then asking a few questions, a more fluid back-and-forth exchange among participants occurred. The dialogs of Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon offer idealized glimpses of how ancient symposia might have been. Kluth (1997, par. 2) and Dwyer (2002, par. 3) emphasize the primary goal of such events was fraternity rather than scholarship.

Moving forward to the Renaissance, it seems clear that the discursive features of many academic assemblies became less prevalent. Respected scholars spoke at academic gatherings in Latin, which enjoyed more status than the vernacular. As a set form of discourse within a fixed social hierarchy, the audience was expected to listen patiently as each savant lectured with little or no direct feedback. It is difficult to reconstruct what actually happened at academic gatherings of yore, but literature offers occasional glimpses. For example, Erasmus (1509, tr. 1668) satirized the pedants of his day who would, "boozle young men's heads with certain empty notions and curious trifles" and "bring in some foolish insipid fable . . . and expound it allegorically, topologically, and anagogically." Such remarks suggest that less than inspiring academic discourse has a long tradition.

Two centuries after Erasmus wondered, "What does all this trumpery drive at?" the 86th Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Seeker, described the tedium of the academic assemblies of his day in which "only the old philosophy of the schools was taught . . . and that neither ably nor diligently" (Ward & Waller, 1907). Ample evidence suggests that for centuries at most academic conferences" at least in the West "knowledge was regarded as a *product* to be dispensed rather than as an interactive *process* of constructing (and deconstructing) experience (Smith, 1999, 2003). This objectification of information has had profound effects on education. For one thing, it has encouraged scholars to regard listeners as empty containers to be filled rather than construct meanings based on their own experience (Palmer, 1998, quoted in Yero, 2002, p. 101). Cognitive content was accentuated over affective factors: mastery of the facts stood paramount. Furthermore, if knowledge is viewed as a product, it becomes tempting to consider ways to ship, package, and sell this intellectual capital efficiently. This is one of the reasons that Aronowitz (2000) cautions against regarding universities as mere "knowledge factories" by warning:

> If knowledge is subject to market forces . . . [and it] can be bought and sold like any other commodity, what follows is that scientific knowledge has become private property and the research university is sustained by its ability to sell its wares to the highest bidder, in which case it becomes itself a corporate entity. (p. 110)

Hints that any knowledge-as-a-product paradigm is flawed occur periodically throughout history. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, suggests in part that active engagement is essential for deep learning. He underscored the value of problem solving and analysis in tackling new information (Ross, Schneider, & Waldman, 1974, quoted in Kauffman, 2000). Though widely criticized for his empirical focus, Hobbes also stressed that education involves the inculcation of moral values as well as the presentation of data. Admittedly, the educational pronouncements by Hobbes are diverse and at times conflicting, yet in places he foreshadows later psychologists by suggesting, "Men's wills are to be wrought to our purpose, not by Force, but by Compleasance" (*Leviathan*, Chap. 31, par. 8).

Comenius echoed similar sentiments. Though his primary focus was with youth, his core ideas pertain to learners of any age and in any educational setting. His 'Principles for Facilitating Teaching and Study' from the *Didactica Magna* (1633-1638) offer worthy insights for those contemplating how to organize academic events. Towards the end of his life, Comenius formulated three basic educational principles (Bovet, 1943, p. 196 quoted by Piaget, 1993, p. 180). Those can be paraphrased in terms of symposium planning this way:

1. The content should proceed by stages based on the needs, interests, and ability of the audience.

2. Participants should be encouraged to examine new concepts for themselves, without pressure to accept new information merely on the basis of authority.

3. Participants should have a chance to guess openly, discuss, and request clarification so that they can make their own self-discoveries in a spirit of "auto-praxis".

Though his vision of "teaching all things to all men" never was realized, the ideas of Comenius have inspired educators for generations. Indeed, many post-modern theories can be traced back to his notions. Such theories are particularly important when attempting to work with today's young learners, dubbed variously as "Generation Y", "Generation neXt", "Echo Boomers", and "Millennials" (Crown Financial Ministries, 2006; Tinsley, 2008; Wikipedia, 2009). According to Taylor (2005, par. 5-12), most of today's college students born somewhere between 1984 – 2002 tend to exhibit these learning characteristics:

1. They believe teachers should pleasantly engage students in collaborative ways, seeing themselves as market consumers and expecting teachers to fulfill many of their basic needs in "fun" ways. Whereas older students tended to feel they had to conform to their teachers' dictates, younger students are more inclined to believe instructors should be responsive to them. Afterall, they are ones paying for the "educational product"

2. They generally want to know what rewards will accrue from a given educational course or workshop. Today's kids are generally less inclined to study for the sake of scholarship itself: only if clear rewards are identified are they inspired to make efforts. As such, teachers (and conference presenters) need to "sell" their ideas to the audience by showing them how the topic matter is valuable and worth learning.

3. Many young folks now have adopted a "life is a cafeteria" attitude. They want options concerning how and what they learn. Instead of having only one set curriculum that must be rigidly followed, they prefer to select from a range of choices based on their inclinations and needs.

4. Many students now prefer learning-centered environments over traditional teaching-centered environments. They generally wish to be actively involved in the learning process rather than sit quietly during lectures. If they are unhappy with a class, they will either "tune out" by playing with their cell phones or iTunes, or – if possible – shop around until they find something more appealing.

5. Many students are accustomed to assessment against external criteria. Most kids today are more "test savvy" than older folks and generally want to know what scoring rubric is being used in detail. Towards the end of a course, they expect to have a pretty good idea of what their final grade will be.

Naturally, not all persons between the ages 6 – 25 fit this description, but it does seem many university age students have a number these attributes. However, Taylor argues there is frequently a mismatch between the preferred learning styles of the bulk of current students and the traditional educational methods found in most academic conferences and classrooms. He also contends that most

schools are not evolving fast enough to meet the evolving needs of Internet-savvy youth with short attention spans. Though Taylor's comments are based on experiences with university students in the USA, many of today's university-age Japanese students seem to share many of the characteristics noted in Taylor's research.

A Sample Symposium

Let us now briefly consider a symposium that was offered on October 25, 2008 by the Toyo University Institute of Human Science. Though some of these remarks are critical, the event itself was a typical small-scale conference. The problems identified here seem to occur in many academic events.

(i) *Participant Analysis*

According to Weinman (2001), presenters and conference organizers need to understand who event participants are, why they are attending, and what expectations they are carrying into the door. In some countries, it is not uncommon to begin conference discussions by asking the audience such questions (UTSG Study Group, n.d., par. 3). That did not happen at the October symposium considered here, but since I knew 14 of the 16 participants to at least some degree, it was easy to construct a participant profile. That information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *An analysis of the participants at an Oct. 25, 2008 Toyo University I.H.S. symposium.*

Type of Participant	**Members Present**	**Likely Reasons for Attending**	**Probable Expectations**
Featured speakers	3 panelists 1 moderator	invited to speak or moderate	were told to expect up to 30 students and a few teachers
Administrative staff	2 conf. organizers 1 student aide	primarily administrative	an organizationally smooth conference with 20-40 present
University faculty	1 part-time teacher 1 full-time teacher	Institute members personally invited	hard to ascertain . . . possibly future panelists (?)
Students	7 undergrads	mostly to obtain classroom credit	most wanted information for future travel abroad

Essentially, there were two groups of participants at this event: teachers and undergraduates. These groups had significantly varied reasons for attending and quite likely differing expectations. Six of the student attendees were from my class. They came to this event primarily to receive classroom credit towards their final grades. It is not uncommon for teachers to adopt token economic principles and use grade incentives to reward desired behaviors (Kohn, 1999; Wallin, 2001; Pressley, 2006, par. 8).

(ii) *Content Analysis*

This symposium had two phases, spliced by a brief intermission. A chronological overview appears in Table 2.

Table 2. *A chronological analysis of the Oct. 25, 2008 Toyo University I.H.S. symposium.*

Event	Approx. Length	Main Content
Opening Remarks	7-8 minutes	Greetings from the moderator & 2 conference organizers
Panelist 1	30 minutes	Focus on stereotypes of the Southern USA
Panelist 2	30 minutes	Deconstructing "foreignness" & stereotype-bashing
Panelist 3	30 minutes	Classroom approaches to "international English"
Q & A Session	15 minutes	Questions to respective panelists
Intermission	5 minutes	(nearly all students left at this point)
Moderated Discussion	45 minutes	Roundtable sharing of views about teaching English & culture

The first phrase consisted of a few introductory remarks and three presentations in an expository lecture mode. The second phase was more discursive and participatory. Except for one student volunteer, all participants were teaching foreign languages to undergraduates in Japan. It is noteworthy that all of the student participants (except the volunteer) were out of the doors soon after intermission. When I reflect on this symposium several months after the event, the most memorable part was the final discussion. Why? Most likely because I was actively involved in that part. According to a constructivist view of knowledge, the process of learning something is at least as important as the information itself (Bartlett, 1932;

Bragg, Swenson, & Canfield, 2004). Whether it was because the final panel was unscripted or simply because the focus was also more relevant to my teaching needs " or possible a combination of both factors " the final discussion remains the most vivid feature of this conference in my mind. An analysis of six of the student essays following this event suggests that there was a mismatch between expectations and symposium content. I told my students the symposium would offer "useful information" about issues pertaining to studying abroad. Indirectly that statement was correct, but the written feedback suggests that the Generation Y-ers did not feel the symposium content directly pertained to their lives. Taylor (2005, par. 2) stresses how crucial it is for educators to underscore the value of a given field of study when speaking to today's learners by stating:

> Our current postmodern times require more ownership information and ideas by students, developed through the personal construction of knowledge, and so suggest the need to alter a number of fundamental "traditional" practices. Some changes will require the recognition of the consumer based realities of higher education in the third millennium; if school is not fun and does not have apparent meaning and/or benefit, young people will not participate, or participate in full and authentic ways.

(iii) *Organizational Analysis*

From an organizational point of view, a successful symposium is one in which there is congruence between the objectives, topics, timeframe, roles, and size (Weinman, 2001). Successful symposia should also be transparent in terms of policy formulation and finances. Unfortunately, few academic conferences " at least in Japan " fulfill all of these criteria.

At most universities in Japan, the planning of academic conferences follows a reverse engineering model: on the basis of previous precedents, future academic events are organized. There is seldom any systematic analysis of the merits and demerits of existing structures " conference planners probably rely on subjective impressions. As cultural memeplexes (Blackmore, 2000; Distin, 2004), it seems that symposia have an almost self-replicating power: unless a given event is widely problematized by key stakeholders (or budget constraints have significantly changed the fiscal climate of the sponsoring institution), future conferences tend to pattern themselves after past events. In terms of structure and format, the 2008 symposium discussed herein differed little from the symposia of

2007 or 2006. Though infometric scientists such as Posner (2001, pp. 317-333) and Hubbard (2007, pp. 85-102) have suggested ways to systematically evaluate the costs/benefits of intangible assets such as symposia, at this point in time their ideas are not widely utilized.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a more process-oriented and task-conscious approach to conferences, both in terms of organizational planning as well as actual presentations. Noting that young learners tend to favor different learning modes than those offered at most academic events, concern should be raised about the relatively low levels of participation among undergraduates at symposia. If academic gatherings are to serve as more than platforms for specialists to network, then some fundamental rethinking about how to organize such gatherings is warranted. I conclude this paper with three concrete suggestions for future academic gatherings:

1. Get more systematic input from (and about) the target audience: If an event is intended for undergraduates, conference planners should conduct careful needs and interest analyses of that specific population. If an event is intended for a different audience such as faculty, a different needs analysis is called for. A good example of a well-designed needs analysis regarding faculty development can be found in Moeini (2003). Relying on subjective impressions as to what a given population might need or be interested in is not the best symposium planning method, particularly if the target audience differs markedly from the conference planners.

2. Utilize interactive technologies more effectively: Although more than a few academic conferences are now entirely online, there are also advantages to real life interactions (Stewart, 2008). The ideal solution, I believe, is to plan a hybrid conference with both online and offline components. Prior to any physical conference gathering, an online "pre-conference warm up" in which participants share key ideas and become more familiar with the topic is advised. Activating background knowledge on a topic not only makes cognitive sense - in the process of interacting socially with others, social rapport can be built. With this grounding, when an actual conference starts, many of the participants will be in a better position to participate more actively (Churchill, Girgensohn, Nelson, & Lee, 2004). Finally, after a conference finishes it may be good to have a "post-conference debriefing" that allows unresolved issues to be clarified and some social networking to continue.

3. Evaluate results more systematically: More sophisticated feedback mechanics for future symposia are recommended in order to enhance conference quality. In particular, I recommend adopting infometric principles (Rada, Liu, & Deakin, 1996; Hubbard, 2007;) and some form of cost-benefit analysis following academic events. After all, most symposia represent considerable investments in time and

money. Without a fair cost-benefit analysis, it will be difficult to evaluate the value of a specific event or know which aspects warrant improvement.

Returning to the onion metaphor briefly, we can see that academic gatherings such as symposia are multi-layered affairs. The outer appearance of such events represents merely the superficial skin. Those involved in organizing such events need to deal with many additional layers. Though preparing piquant onions for mass consumption may cause eye sting, there is something tantalizing about a well-cooked, well-prepared conference.

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