

Bum Raps: Daydreams of a Weary Conferencer

By Barry Wellman, University of Toronto

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The worst conference I have attended was in France. Although the subject was “communications”, almost all of the speakers remained sitting, spoke with their hands over their mouths and did not use visual aids.

Fortunately, I had a good book handy (rule #1 for conference attendance). But I stated daydreaming about how to improve the conference experience. Why do talks have to be boring and sessions be both tedious and rushed? Why do I leave most sessions feeling I have wasted most of my time? One hit out of an hour is as mediocre in conference sessions as it is in baseball. We need to change how we organize conferences and present papers.

(1) Conference Organizers Should Demand Papers in Advance.

At least, they should make as a condition of participation that the presenter submit a summary of about five pages, This improves the odds that the speaker will not insult and bore the audience by being unprepared. I am tired of folks throwing disorganized material at me when I have made an effort to attend and hear them. My most horrible experience was a famous keynote speaker who rambled on for 45 minutes and disappeared the next day without attending a conference session.

Some might object that demanding papers in advance would detract from casualness and spontaneity. But if speakers cannot bat out five-page summaries of what they are going to say, they are rude to ask people to give up time, energy and money to listen to them. By contrast to many sociological conferences, the computer scientists with whom I am collaborating must submit papers in advance to a program committee. Their quality is as good as ours and so is their informal discussion. At the least, the program should identify the talks where the authors did not submit papers or summaries in advance.

(2) Exchange Papers in Advance Among Presenters.

If each paper-giver knew what the others in the session were going to say, they could usefully refer to each other’s ideas when thy spoke and wrote. They could transform a session from a disconnected series of papers into a more integrated whole. It takes a little work, but the payoff in coherence would be worth it. Right now, papers that should be in dialogue just go past each other on parallel tracks.

(3) Insist that Presenters Have Something to Say.

One of the most horrible experiences was hearing a doctoral student speak vaguely about the research he might do someday if he ever got around to writing a thesis proposal. I was chairing the session, and I got so mad at his waste of the audience's time that I told him we would be happy to entertain questions at a future conference when he had accomplished something. Another disaster was when a faculty member presented a conceptual scheme with 25 variables and 86 arrows connecting them. "What should I study first?" he plaintively asked in conclusion.

I come to conferences to find out what others have found out, the techniques they used, and the theoretical ideas associated with accomplishing their research. Unless it is an innovative or mega-project, I do not want to listen to a paper about something that might be done in the future. I know that graduate students think their theses are important—this is a necessary sustaining myth to get through a doctoral program. Students can—and should—get a lot of informal advice at conferences. But a conference is not the place to put the audience to sleep with an unresearched conceptual theme.

(4) Stand and Deliver.

A good indicator that a talk will be boring is when the speaker remains sitting down. In many cases, this indicates that the speakers do not think that they have anything interesting to say. In other cases, the speakers are talking to please themselves rather than to communicate with their audiences. Why should I listen?

When people stand, they talk from the diaphragm. They use body language and engage the audience's visual attention. They project more forcefully and talk more interestingly.

(5) Talk, Don't Read.

Speakers should tell a paper like a story. Presenting a paper is an oral-aural medium; reading a written-out paper word-for-word ignores the usefulness of talking face-to-face. When people read their papers, they usually fall into a boring, singsong rhythm. In the audience, my brain waves fall into a trance where nothing penetrates. Only Richard Burton or Dylan Thomas could make reading out loud interesting. The rest of us should speak from notes. If people insist on reading their papers, then I prefer that they just hand me copies. I can read them by myself more quickly and comfortably.

A paper must be presented actively, using verbal cues and selectivity to emphasize the highlights of the story line. I cannot remember the details anyway; they will be waiting for me in the written text. When you are telling a paper, you are doing jazz. Improvise; do not read the score!

(6) *Papers Should Be Seen as well as Heard.*

Speakers should use slides or handouts even if only to give outlines of their papers. Visual messages improve cognition by actively engaging multiple senses. Otherwise, listeners will default to passive auditory withdrawal. Some people receive information aurally and some visually. When speakers use slides, the audience gets information from both. Projecting an outline early in the talk gives the audience a sense of the structure of an argument. Speakers should also project a final summary. A paper is not a magical mystery tour. An audience understands better if it knows where the speaker is going and where the talk has taken them.

Powerpoint is great for this. It works better when the slides convey short bulleted points rather than paragraph. (Save the long paragraphs for your verbal talk.) Keep the focus on what you want to say, and not on the design of the slides. Don't use more than two (or three) colors: light type on dark color works best. Avoid fussy borders (which *Powerpoint* thrusts on you too easily), and use sans-serif type like Arial.

Don't get carried away by the wonders of *Powerpoint*. Fancy dissolves slow presentations down and annoy audiences. So do audio noises in transitions. And too many colors just confuse people. Also make sure that the colors you use can be seen. For example, *Excel* once gave me a baby-blue line that was invisible from more than 1 meter away.

Data should also be up there in lights. But, do not just photocopy a large table or a long quotation. Pick out the interesting stuff, ignore the detail, and throw it up in large readable type: at least 18 point in size. The most horrible slide I ever saw was when someone projected a spreadsheet of 50 rows by 100 columns. His whole talk consisted of waving at unreadable lines on the screen. He never explained what was up there, a common failing when people cram too much detail into a slide. If you must present large tables or long quotations, try to use handouts where readers can actually see the 12 or 10-point type. And for some reason, tables read better with sans-serif type, such as Arial.

With the Internet, it is easy to add visuals. A few cute cartoons are nice as starters, to break up monotony in the middle, and to clinch a point at the end. However, if you use too many, your talk degenerates into cute rather than informative.

The more that you engage the audience, the better. Try to develop ways of going beyond just giving the audience a monologue. You might ask them for questions or advice. If appropriate, you might link your *Powerpoint* to a short video clip. In one case, my wife and I had an audience moving throughout our "talk" in order for them to learn kinesthetically how body language affects perception of social support.

(7) *Pointers on Pointing.*

How do you get your audience to see what you see in the slides? Too many presenters turn their backs on the audience and commune with the screen, transfixed by the beauty of what they wrought. They may even wave their hands at the screen in a lame effort to show the audience something. Yet all the audience sees is a large, dark silhouette of their arms.

It is better to face the audience and use a laser pointer or a stainless-steel telescoping pointer. Engineers and architects use them for their million-dollar presentations. Like Greek worry beads, they are also nice pacifiers for nervous hands while you are talking. When you use a laser pointer, you can make believe that you are Luke Skywalker. It is just the thing for pointing from a distance to large-screen slide shows. May the force be with you!

(8) *Have Longer Papers.*

This is the idea about which I am the most ambivalent. When a paper is boring, we pray that the speaker will finish soon. But how many times have papers been butchered by compression to ten or twenty minutes? The problem is compounded when lazy or inexperienced speakers spend fifteen minutes on their introduction, so that their more interesting findings get squeezed incoherently into the last five minutes.

My dream is to hear papers in which the speakers say thoughtful things in relaxed, intriguing ways. Such breathing room will include significant dialogue with the audience instead of speakers doggedly plowing through their points, hoping to beat the clock. I would guess the general optimum would be between twenty-five and forty minutes, including discussion. Why not limit to ten minutes those presenters who have not submitted a paper or outline in advance? Their thoughts will be so disorganized it would be painful to listen longer. And we ought to give special kudos to those speakers who say what they need to in a shorter time—and sit down.

(9) *Have a Discussion after Every Paper.*

Next time you are listening to the last speaker in a session, try to remember what the first speakers said. It is almost impossible to do. You are either too excited by the final speaker or have been put to sleep by another boring paper. Inevitably, when questions are held to the end of the session, almost all questions go to the last speaker. The rest of us just sit there, smile bravely, and feel frustrated that the work we have spent so much time doing is being totally ignored. More frequent alternation between paper-giving and question-asking will enliven the rhythm of the session and move it away from being a drone.

(10) *Chairs Should be Active Participants.*

Too often, session chairs seem like bored announcers listlessly intoning, “The next speaker is...” If a chair looks bored, an audience will pick up his/her cues. The chair should always be ready to ask the first questions. This would be a good time to set the norm of asking engaged, but not chopping, questions. If the audience is still quiet, then the chair should ask the other speakers in the session to comment. This will reawaken the audience to continue the game. I have seen chairs at humanities conferences do this well. The result is informal discussion that is often more lively and informative than the paper itself.

One caution: Choose with care what you say and to whom you say it. At a recent network analysis conference, I waved a sign in front of a speaker: “Only five more minutes.” The speaker stared at me and said forcefully, “Are you kidding?” As she is my wife, she spoke as long as she wanted.

(11) *Get Audiences Off of Their Bums*

Fitness experts agree that people should not sit for more than an hour or so. The body hurts; attention lags. It is nice to give everyone a stretch in the middle. The time will not be wasted because people will listen more alertly. If you combine this with a coffee break, then you will have more informal chat—the key to good conferences.

(12) *Keep Sessions Short.*

There is more time to chat in the hallways when sessions last only an hour and a half instead of the normal two hours. We will have more tightly-focused sessions rather than grab-bags of scarcely-linked papers. Those who are too polite to walk out in the middle of a session will be able to move to a session that interests them more. Jane Jacobs pointed out in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* that short blocks make livelier streets. The point holds here too.

Taking my advice to have shorter sessions and longer papers means that more sessions may be needed to get all the papers in. However, there may not be as many papers if organizers start demanding papers in advance.

(13) *Keep Lots of Non-Session Time.*

Most people enjoy and profit from informal interactions more than from formal papers. If we consider the papers we present as brief advertisements of our work (like teasers in an intellectual strip-tease), then we can discuss informally their deep meaning and details. That is when people can ask focused, pointed questions, and when we are more likely to let our hair down and admit uncertainty. I would like to see shorter sessions but more time between sessions.

The Sunbelt Social Network Conference, a most serious conference, does a wonderful job of promoting informal interaction. Its cardinal rule is not to have any sessions—but lots of discussion—during peak tanning hours.

For International Conferences

(14) *Prepare Many Advance Copies of All Papers.*

At a Paris conference, there were clear divisions between francophones and anglophones. (The Americans and the French, in that order, were the most unilingual participants.) People who could only listen to one language daydreamed when the other

was spoken. This showed in the questions: Only francophones asked questions about papers presented in French. The reverse was true for anglophones.

However, many people read a foreign language better than they understand (often-rapid) speech in that language. They will have less trouble following speaker if they have a text in front of them. Even if the speaker does not read from the text, the order and key points will be similar. Preparing papers in advance will go a long way towards comprehension.

The international trend now is to use English throughout conferences. Even some of the French participants at the Paris conference gave their papers in English. Indeed, a new dialect is forming, “Euro-English,” which people with different native languages use to communicate with one another.

There is a danger that the spread of English in conferences may give native English speakers the illusion that all they say is perfectly understood. Yet many speakers mumble or speak rapidly when they get excited giving their papers. So even if the conference language is English, printed texts of papers are appreciated and often necessary.

(15) Use Bilingual or Cross-Language Slides.

At the Paris conference, one speaker from Germany gave his talk in English but labeled his outlines and tables in French. He was truly a master of communication. The anglophones could follow the speech, while the unilingual francophones got the gist of it through the slides. Although translating the text of a paper is a big job, it is often easy and cheap to translate a few table captions. For one thing, there is less need to worry about syntax.

(16) Communicate, Don't Masturbate¹

I have been reflecting about my French conference experience. Why did those speakers sit there, mumbling into their hands? I believe that they did not care about communicating. Their interest was only in impressing themselves with the beauty of their own prose.

Too often, people give papers as if they were talking only for themselves. In their quest for self-gratification, they forget they have an audience, and they do not take into account who that audience is. Yet giving a paper at a conference is a crucial way to communicate to a large proportion of those who are interested in your work. We may have more listeners to our talks than we will have readers of our published papers. We will certainly have gotten our messages across sooner. A published paper should be the final, “official” notice of what those active in the field should have learned much earlier from conferences and working papers. The conference talk should be where the actions is!

¹ In the published text, “Masturbate” was expurgated by *Footnotes* into the different connotation of “Self-Inflate”.