
FORUM

First Aid for Listeners: Why Humanities Conferences Need to Change their Format

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Several people straggle in and search for a place as I listen to the first literary scholar on the conference panel read her essay verbatim. Before the third person finishes reading aloud, my wrist hurts from taking notes, and my body aches with the strain of trying to concentrate on the stream of *written* information coming at me. By the time the fourth speaker finishes, several people are gone, and more leave before the questions begin. The moderator looks apologetically at her watch and announces that the question and answer session must be cut short because the presenters have exceeded their allotted time. The pressure to speak before the next panel claims the room leaves an uncomfortable silence. After a few questions, people drift off, looking dazed.

Unless you are unusually fortunate, you are likely to have attended a conference panel similar to this one. If this is a routine experience, you may even have wondered if you will ever use an idea you got *merely* from listening to it in a conference panel. If panels were convened mainly to recite written words, it would follow that associations distribute works in progress to a mailing list and then give everyone a deadline by which to respond with questions or comments. Although higher education and thus department budgets continue to be slashed, no one yet has suggested that academics only teleconference or send electronic mail; conferences are supported because valuable work gets produced through direct contact and dialogue with other people who are engaged by the same questions. Unfortunately, however, the current format at many humanities conventions does not always lead to stimulating dialogue within the panel sessions themselves.

Although the earliest humanities scholars chose the format of reading essays verbatim from a piece of paper, a number of possible presentation formats cur-

rently suit professional academic organizations:

- 1) the argument is presented extemporaneously with the use of slides or other visual aids;¹
- 2) the paper is presented on posterboards in a large hall where scholars roam freely;²
- 3) the speakers gather to summarize their argument extemporaneously and then a discussant responds; papers are not read at all because members request and read the paper in advance;³
- 4) the speaker argues extemporaneously; the paper is not available in advance;
- 5) the speaker is offered the choice of speaking extemporaneously or reading;⁴
- 6) the papers are read verbatim from pieces of paper; a respondent may then read a prewritten response.

Many humanities conferences, including the Modern Language Association Convention and those of most of its regional organizations, expect scholars to follow this last format, primarily in the interest of verifiability and validity. Of course, we additionally benefit from the ease of delivery this method provides, for the worst thing that can happen to oral readers is that they reverse the order of the pages or skip a line when looking down. What gets shortchanged by imitating written publication and emphasizing the substance of the argument in exact pre-chosen phrases is dialogic interaction. Question-and-answer sessions are supposed to provide this interaction, but these are often ineffective because of the very format we require. For instance, attendees often focus on the last paper they have heard because its phrases are still ringing through their heads; presumably they have trouble remembering the first one, or worry about relying on their hurriedly scribbled notes. Other people complain that listening to three and sometimes four essays read aloud leaves them with little energy or desire to engage in a long discussion. Finally, I have repeatedly seen question-and-answer sessions scrapped completely owing to lack of questions or lack of time. When presenters are allowed to exceed their time (as happens frequently) they effectively prohibit dialogic interaction, the very purpose of conferring together.

If the primary goal of attending a conference is to retain ideas and have our own ideas be remembered by others, we need to validate a variety of presentation styles, and discourage the pure reading of essays practiced today. Attendees do not acknowledge what everyone knows from experience: hearing a great speech spoken and a hearing a great essay read are intrinsically different. For example, as linguist Jack Goody has found, written documents are more likely to contain passive constructions, longer words, more Latinate ones and “elaborate syntactic and semantic structures, especially nominalizations” (264). Because written language is

not composed in a face-to-face setting with a common physical environment, it is likely to be more abstract and thus harder to absorb auditorily (268). Hence reading papers is a poor substitute for the dynamic interaction and emotional atmosphere possible in a great presentation. Because a reader's stimulus is static, the address becomes predictable, and movement and energy are minimized. Of course, some scholars transcend the built-in predictability of reading by rehearsing the acts of looking up, pausing, or beginning with a joke, but the format clearly lulls a sizable group into a comfortable drone, possibly causing us to lose the content of the talk.

I believe the frustration some scholars experience from conferences shows the weaknesses of our current presentation format. To reach their audience more effectively, humanities scholars should combine extemporaneous delivery with reading quotations or passages for which one wants exact language. By directly engaging with the audience, rather than printed pages, we may create more empathy among our listeners and build a stronger sense of community, which in turn may produce more thoughtful work. Furthermore, a format that includes extemporaneous speaking enables speakers to reach more people with varied learning styles. Finally, our format clashes with current post-structuralist epistemology and hence does not represent a good compromise.

To maintain interest through drama, speakers who speak rather than read are more able to make vital contact with their listeners, through body language, particularly eye contact. Eye contact helps to cultivate flexibility and variety and plays a crucial role because the eyes and mouth best reveal our emotions and desire to engage with the audience. The study of humanities examines human values, and it seems ironic that those values are communicated through a format that discourages actual connection.

Significantly, many oral cultures induce cooperation and sustain relationships "through participatory rituals in which relevant cultural knowledge ... [is] communally enacted, sung, danced, chanted, celebrated and shared" (Haynes 91).⁵ When information is distributed by direct contact only, the village itself is designed so that people can have easy access to one another. For instance, houses are often built in circles to minimize the distance between them. Similarly, composition and seminar instructors often require their students to sit in a circle. Among other effects, students' ability to see one another helps them understand they are equally in a position to claim attention. Obviously, we are sustaining ourselves without sitting in circles at conferences, but clearly, the greater need for exchange has been recognized by the roundtable discussions some conferences offer. Of course, there are many ways to develop a sense of community, but we would definitely encour-

age a more dynamic exchange among conferees if participants were to relish each others' presentations more. If we adopt a format that allows us to maintain interest through dramatic vocalization and eye contact, we will increase empathy with the speaker and thereby increase the feeling of community at conferences. More than just providing a pleasant atmosphere, strong community leads to a greater flow of ideas, which in turn leads to enhanced scholarship.

Although no studies have measured how much is retained when listening to pre-written academic essays, in the Trenaman and Norwich experiments, John McLeish found that students were able to copy down in their notes and take away "41 percent of a fifteen minute talk, 25 percent of a thirty minute ... lecture, and only 20 percent of what was said during forty-five minutes, which indicates that the attention levels decline during a lecture delivered in a traditional manner" (Penner 128).⁶ Although scholars have a greater attention span, more interest in the topic, and hear multiple reading styles in one panel, I believe we would be discouraged by how much is actually remembered from listening to written essays.

Encouraging scholars to deliver their essays in a variety of ways has the added advantage of reaching people with different learning styles. As studies on adult learning and learning styles have increasingly shown, some people are impeded by information that is only presented auditorily. Educator Howard Gardner's work particularly has drawn public attention to the existence of multiple intelligences. *Frames of Mind: the Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983) and *Multiple Intelligences: the Theory in Practice* (1993) find evidence for six "intelligences" or independent abilities (linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, and personal).⁷ Gardner explains that neuropsychological research indicates the brain has areas of strength that may appear even before the age of formal schooling, and it is common to be strong in one or two cognitive spheres "while being average or below average in other areas" (Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences* 138). We are finally realizing, in the words of Robert Ornstein that "we are never dealing with a standard individual with a standard mind" (51). Thus it makes sense to present ideas at conferences in more than one format, to invite comprehension through all preferred modes of learning.⁸ For instance, visual learners and those who possess strong spatial intelligence are aided by the use of overhead projectors, videocassette clips, and printed outlines or lists of quotations, and the availability of abstracts in the program or in advance on the internet. Visual and kinaesthetic learners are likely to take notes on what they hear (because notetaking gives people an extra picture to see and a physical way to experience the information), and they

accomplish this more readily if speakers speak slowly, a likely effect of extemporaneous delivery.⁹

Our current format not only limits retention, but seems an outmoded post-structuralist remnant. If we take for granted the claim that the search for a “pure meaning” has been displaced by the idea that texts are open to multiple, valid interpretations, it seems fitting to present our ideas in a more dialogic form. Many post-structuralists question the elevation of writing; for instance, Derrida asserts that all language is only an arbitrary representation of thought; however, because a text cannot immediately be questioned, whereas a speaker can, he regards speech as less capable of misappropriation. Developing deconstructionists’ distrust of signs as being hopelessly overdetermined by the context of their utterance, communications scholar W. Lance Haynes explains that the linear form required of written argument may emphasize “the connection of minute experiential details to each other at the expense of due regard for the myriad complexity from which such details arise. . . . When writing-based public speaking expects the speaker’s choices to result primarily . . . from prior deliberation, the quality of interaction is placed at risk” (Haynes 95). In addition, composition scholars have recently shown us the value of the transactional model of reading and writing literary analysis.¹⁰ In other words, we realize how texts’ richness may be revealed by exploring the questions of our students (rather than by simply presenting a series of facts). Similarly, we need not cling to the traditional lecture style when sharing insights with one another.

If you think back to how you felt while watching your favorite professor teach, you will remember that part of the satisfaction of this listening experience stemmed from the (conscious or unconscious) knowledge that they were both instructing and learning simultaneously. Occasionally through an extemporaneous talk, a speaker has new insights, which in itself may illustrate richness of meaning. My most memorable professors possessed not only fine minds but qualities that every admirable actor has: expressive faces, expressive bodies, expressive voices. Shouldn’t going to a conference and hearing a paper be as exciting as hearing that favorite professor speak extemporaneously in class, perhaps *the* class that made us decide to become scholars? I firmly believe *publishing* provides a record of what one has to say in the exact way one wants to say it, and that *conferring* creates an opportunity to explore one’s ideas, not pretend as if they are already beyond question. Making more options available would better tap our potential as a collective of scholars. It is time for humanities conference organizers to acknowledge the limited value of recitation and use a variety of formats to foster more creativity, spontaneity, and community.¹¹ ✨

NOTES

¹This is typically true of scientific conferences, such as the American Geophysical Union. According to Stanford University Chemistry professor Richard N. Zare, the few scholars who read their arguments are typically judged as either being extremely nervous or uncomfortable with the English language (telephone interview, 1 October 1994).

²Again, this format is normally used in the field of science, in which diagrams or graphs accompany publications as well as presentations.

³According to Jerilyn Fisher, Administrative Associate of the Midwest Modern Language Association, the MMLA uses this format very successfully, stamping each paper with a warning against unauthorized use. (telephone Interview, 6 July 1995).

⁴For example, presenters at the American Psychological Association are offered this choice, and only 40% choose to read their papers. This information was passed on to me by the Conference Coordinator of the American Psychological Association (1 October 1994).

⁵Haynes bases his discussion on Eric Havelock's work on primary orality in *The Muse Learns to Write* (1986) 63-78, and Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literature* (1982). Ong has found that "Primary orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, and less introspective than those common among literates. Oral communication unites people in groups" (69).

⁶For other similar findings, see D. H. Lloyd's "Communication in the University Lecture" (1967) and A.H. Johnstone's and F. Percival's "Attention Breaks in Lectures" (1976), cited in Penner 128.

⁷To qualify as an independent ability, the following things must be demonstrated to exist: an identifiable core of skills, a characteristic pattern of development, a number of specifiable end-states, and evidence for neurological representation as well as discernible patterns after a (physical) breakdown of this capacity. See *Frames of Mind* (esp. 8, 70).

⁸Gardner has led the way in campaigning for portfolio assessment in elementary and secondary education to take into account the wide variety of contexts under which people may successfully perform tasks. See *Frames of Mind* (384) and *Multiple Intelligences* (179-186).

⁹In addition, scholars with actual physical disabilities may be few in number, but, as Stephen Kuusisto has pointed out, this number would grow if more accommodations were made. Kuusisto spoke on this subject in "Reflections on Disability and Departments of Language and Literature" at the Central New York Conference, Cortland, New York, October 1994.

¹⁰Stanley B. Straw explains the transactional model as one which suggests that reading and writing are interactive activities along the path of comprehension, whereas the transmissive model assumes that knowledge will be passed from author/text/teacher

to passive student. Straw notes, "Implicit in these new [transactional] notions of reading is the idea of the social construction of knowledge and talk in creating and consolidating meaning" (131).

¹¹I am indebted to Jennifer Wicke's (extemporaneously spoken and extraordinarily performed) lecture "Consuming Passions" at Wheaton College, March 1994 for demonstrating what we are missing at conference panels, and to the teaching styles of Nancy Packer, Robert Polhemus, and Terry Castle. Using overheads, I delivered a shorter version of this essay "Why We Should No Longer Read our Conference Papers" extemporaneously at the Central New York Conference, Cortland, New York, October 1994.

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