

Advancing the Conversation: The Roles of Discussants, Session Chairs, and Audience Members at AERA's Annual Meeting

by Keith C. Barton

The value of an academic conference lies in its ability to engage attendees in ongoing scholarly conversations. Such engagement depends on presentations that are intellectually sound and effectively delivered, but it also requires thoughtful participation by discussants, session chairs, and audience members. Shared understanding of the responsibilities that accompany these roles would help advance the conversation of educational scholarship. By adhering to a few simple principles, participants at AERA's annual meeting could better ensure that the conference lives up to its potential for promoting meaningful dialogue.

Those of us who regularly attend annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) do so because we hope to take part in ongoing intellectual conversations. A conference such as AERA's provides a chance to hear about and present recent research, to listen to and put forward newly developed ideas, and to reflect on theory and research in a collegial setting. We might accomplish some of these goals simply by reading books and journals, but we expect a conference to provide a mode of discourse unlike those of other academic genres. The stimulation of a conference derives in part from the fact that the papers can be more

tentative, feedback more immediate, and discussion more collaborative than in other venues. But conferences do not always live up to our expectations for meaningful engagement.

Sam Wineburg's article in the May 2004 issue of *Educational Researcher*, "Must It Be This Way? Ten Rules for Keeping Your Audience Awake During Conferences," provided valuable advice for AERA presenters. If everyone took these rules to heart, we could expect more interesting and enjoyable conferences. Yet even if Wineburg's rules were followed to the letter (and I believe they should be), academic meetings such as AERA's still might fall short of the level of engagement we all hope for. Three other ingredients are necessary for a successful conference: discussants, session chairs, and audience members. Each of these groups plays an important role in raising the level of reflection during paper sessions and symposia—and each can dampen whatever interest presenters themselves may have inspired. Over the past few years I have become frustrated because we share too few expectations for the contributions of participants who are not delivering papers. The following principles may help ensure that when we take on these roles, our efforts will enhance the ongoing dialogue of educational research.

The Role of Discussants

An academic conference provides opportunities not only to learn about the latest theory and research but also to hear from other scholars who have read that work carefully and thought about it deeply. Yet, too often, discussants fail to live up to their responsibilities—and the conference suffers as a result. If discussants followed these three rules, presenters and audiences alike might

feel that they were part of a genuine scholarly exchange.

1. *Discuss the papers.*

Suggesting that papers are worthy of discussion may not seem very radical, but apparently this perspective has not occurred to some discussants. Some never refer to the presented papers but repeatedly mention their own work. Others spend their time decrying the government's lack of funding for their favored research or excoriating their colleagues' lack of interest in important questions. For still others, the problem is not too much self-absorption but too little: They sheepishly admit that they have nothing interesting to say, or that no one in the audience would care about their thoughts, and they suggest moving quickly into the question period.

Each of these tactics deprives presenters of meaningful feedback and robs the audience of insight into the papers' significance—the very reason for having discussants in the first place. Presenters should make sure they send their papers to discussants well in advance, and discussants should block out time to read and reflect on the papers, develop a well-reasoned (and well-timed) analysis, and practice delivery of their comments. If you are asked to be a discussant, it is because symposium organizers or section chairs think you are qualified to take on these responsibilities. If you doubt that your analysis will be enlightening, or if you are not willing to do the hard work of reading, reflecting, writing, and practicing, then you should simply turn down the request. (On the other hand, discussants can hardly be held to these lofty expectations if they do not receive papers in time for careful evaluation; see my later discussion of chair responsibilities.)

The Research News and Comment section publishes commentary and analyses on trends, policies, utilization, and controversies in educational research. Like the articles and reviews in the Features and Book Review sections of *ER*, this material does not necessarily reflect the views of AERA nor is it endorsed by the organization.

2. *Balance synthesis and individual attention.*

Presenters want to know what discussants think of their papers, and it is callous for discussants not to mention each one individually. At the same time, the best discussants do not limit themselves to isolated comments on separate papers, but draw on them to arrive at an overall synthesis—showing, for example, how the papers develop a common idea, present alternative perspectives, or collectively advance the field. Just as students understand and remember content better when lessons end with well-planned closure, conference attendees come away with a better understanding of the significance of individual papers when discussants provide meaningful synthesis.

This task is easier with symposium papers on a shared topic than with papers that are related only by their submission to the same division. With symposia, discussants can develop comments around common themes and draw from each paper as appropriate. Points from individual papers then serve as supporting evidence for overall arguments. Synthesis is more difficult when a set of papers addresses topics as diverse as the history of mining education, effective use of overhead technology, and postcolonial algebra instruction. In that case, discussants will need to spend most of their time analyzing individual papers and simply close with a brief overview that notes similarities and differences. In either situation, discussants will be judged both by their attention to individual papers and by their attempts to draw them together.

3. *Balance praise and criticism.*

Both audience and presenters should know more after discussants' comments than before, and this happens only when discussants are critical—that is, when they evaluate a paper's contribution to the state of knowledge. In some disciplines, discussants are expected to provide strong critiques. Presenters look forward not to affirmation but to stringent feedback that will help them improve their work for publication. Those who do not feel the sting of discussants' remarks may feel short-changed. In education, on the other hand, we tend to be less harsh, and it would be a violation of the conference's norms if discussants criticized individual papers too severely. The task, then, is to recognize the

achievements of individual presenters while, nonetheless, rigorously evaluating the contribution of their work.

One way of doing this is to note the extent to which each paper advances the field. If a paper explores fresh questions, uses innovative methods, or reaches original conclusions, these should be praised—even if the goals are not fully achieved. After all, most inventions require multiple trials before they become effective, and new ideas usually need some development before they reach their potential. And by noting such original contributions, discussants implicitly develop critical insights—because they necessarily draw attention to previous shortcomings in the field (e.g., stating, “This paper’s attention to teachers’ instructional goals provides an important corrective to the dominant focus on content knowledge. . .”). Of course, some papers are easier to praise than others, but even the most mundane usually have some value—a piece of practical advice, an interesting quote, or just a reminder of what we already know—and discussants should make it their job to identify and highlight those insights.

Yet discussants' remarks cannot be restricted to praise. Limitations must also be noted, particularly when presenters have not addressed these themselves. Criticizing papers at a conference, however, differs from evaluating manuscripts submitted for publication. An indirect question, for example, is a more gentle form of criticism than a declarative statement. Asking, “I wonder if other factors may have influenced the findings?” serves the same purpose as stating, “This paper fails to account for numerous threats to internal validity,” but it establishes a more collegial atmosphere. In addition, contextualizing papers within wider traditions of theory and research (which may then be criticized) is more meaningful than noting the shortcomings of individual pieces of work. If some of the papers in a session use surveys to investigate teachers' thinking, for example, the audience would be better served by a discussion of what that methodology can and cannot tell us than by an evaluation of whether presenters followed principles of good survey design. The latter evaluation is appropriate in reviewing a journal manuscript, but the former represents the kind of synthesis that is more likely to stimulate thinking at a conference—and it

is less likely to make presenters feel personally threatened.

Responsibilities of Session Chairs

Session chairs ostensibly have the easiest job on the panel—they have no papers to deliver, and they spend less time engaging the audience than do either presenters or discussants. No wonder, then, that volunteering to serve as chair seems an easy call—even for beginners. Yet, although their work may not be highly visible, chairs can make important contributions to a successful session by keeping the following responsibilities in mind.

1. *Take charge.*

Sessions do not run of their own accord—at least not the good ones. Someone has to enable presenters and discussants to meet the expectations of a successful session. The first task is to make sure that presenters submit papers to the discussant well in advance of the conference. Upon being assigned to a session, the chair should contact the discussant to find out the preferred format and timing for receipt of the session's manuscripts. (Some program chairs may do this, but do not count on it.) Presenters should then be contacted and provided with both a date and an address (email or otherwise) for submitting papers to the discussant. Submission 4 weeks ahead of the conference is a time-honored tradition in this regard, and even if the discussant says 2 weeks is enough, chairs should, nonetheless, give presenters a 4-week deadline—because some presenters will miss the date by 2 weeks anyway. Once the deadline arrives, contact the discussant again to find out if the papers have turned up. If they have not, remind any guilty parties of the importance of providing enough time for reflection.

Another critical task for the chair is to keep time during the session. In the typical four-presenter/one-discussant session, each participant must be limited to 15 minutes in order to provide time for transitions and audience response. In sessions with five presenters, participants will have to be content with 12 minutes, unless they plan to forego audience response altogether (and even then the session will be rushed). Chairs have to keep participants within the time limit. This is usually accomplished by holding up a card when 5 minutes remain and another

when 1 or 2 minutes remain. (Ideally, participants will have practiced and timed their presentations so that they last exactly 15 or 12 minutes, depending on the number of presenters.) If participants fail to notice the cards, chairs must announce the times aloud, even if it seems disruptive; if speakers fail to stop at the allotted time plus 59 seconds, chairs must tell them forcefully that their time is up. It is important to recognize that timing papers is a cultural convention limited, for the most part, to North America. In conferences in other parts of the world, presentations scheduled for 15 minutes routinely take 30 or 40 and, as the day wears on, sessions become increasingly backed up. AERA's annual conference is simply not set up for such flexibility, and presenters who exceed their time literally steal minutes from others in their session—hence the need to strictly enforce limits. Be aware, though, that presenters who are unfamiliar with North American conferences may chafe at such restrictions or even refuse to believe they exist. In such cases, you will have to make it clear that when you say 15 (or 12) minutes, you mean just that.

2. *Introduce the session and speakers.*

Session chairs should do more than simply set their sessions in motion: they should introduce both the speakers and the session itself. This involves, first, welcoming the audience and identifying the sponsoring division or special interest group. This takes only a moment and it helps attendees better understand how the session relates to AERA's organizational structure. Although that may seem like a matter of little importance to some, divisions and special interest groups often have distinct identities and traditions, and audience members can benefit from understanding how each session fits into the larger organization. Rather than thinking of the conference as a smorgasbord of individual contributions, attendees may develop a greater appreciation of the unique problems, approaches, and discursive styles that characterize the differing subdivisions of AERA. This should enable them to make better-informed choices about the spaces they might like to occupy within the organization.

Chairs also should introduce the session's speakers in the order in which they will speak and should note their institutional affiliations and paper titles (or role as discus-

sant). This information is in the program, but by reiterating it—and by doing so clearly and confidently—the chair can set a positive and enthusiastic tone for the session. Such introductions reassure the audience that the speakers have arrived, that they will give their presentations in the correct sequence, and that they are worthy of attention. A chair who conveys interest in the upcoming session inspires the audience's interest; an apathetic chair sends the message that this session may be of little value.

3. *Provide context and structure.*

We all know that students' understanding of content must be carefully scaffolded; simple exposure to information is unlikely to result in deep comprehension. So, too, at academic conferences: When audience members are alerted to the context of a session, and when their engagement with the session is clearly structured (particularly during questions and answers), they stand an increased chance of developing their own insights and benefiting from those of others. To provide such scaffolding, the session chair should briefly explain the substantive content of the session. If the session is a planned symposium—or if the papers demonstrate a thematic coherence even in the absence of such planning—the chair should give a brief overview of the topics to be addressed. This might involve describing the origin and development of the panel (e.g., “This symposium arose from concerns about the absence of gender in formulating research questions about . . .”) or noting the similarity of papers (e.g., “Each of these papers investigates students' understanding of . . .”). Although the introduction may be brief, it nonetheless serves as an advance organizer that clarifies audience members' expectations about the nature and degree of connectedness of the session.

Session chairs also should actively moderate the give-and-take of audience response. This means calling on individual attendees rather than allowing a free-for-all dominated by those who are loudest or most insistent. This is no easy matter, because chairs must attend to multiple variables; ideally, they should not only take into account timing of requests but also distribute response opportunities across gender, ethnicity, and any other salient characteristics of the audience. In addition, chairs sometimes need to connect questions to the appropri-

ate panelist. When audience members ask questions that are for no one in particular, and when no panelist immediately answers, the chair should suggest which speaker might best respond—if for no other reason than to keep the session moving along instead of becoming mired in uncomfortable silences. Similarly, when an audience member makes a comment that does not call for (or allow) a response, the chair needs to recognize that and move on to the next person. Finally, the chair must know when enough is enough—either because time has run out or because no more questions are being asked—and must call an end to the session. And remember: Letting the session go beyond its allotted time signals gross disrespect both for audience members who are ready to leave and for attendees who have arrived for the next session.

Participation by Audience Members

Conferences exist not just for presenters but for audience members—without them, there would be no conference. But audience members are not simply passive consumers, like shoppers in a store. They also have a role to play in advancing the conversation. To live up to their responsibilities, audience members must look beyond their own agenda and think about the greater good of the profession. There are at least three important ways of doing that.

1. *Show respect for the presenters.*

Common wisdom among teachers is that they themselves make the worst audience members and behave in ways they would never tolerate from students. Many educational researchers are former teachers, and some of us seem to have carried these behaviors into our new careers. We would do well to remind ourselves of a few obvious rules of etiquette: When we need to pass notes, we should do it discreetly. When we are compelled to talk to our neighbors, we should whisper *very* quietly. And when we want to look at our conference programs, we should do so without flipping loudly through the pages.

Another area of audience behavior is more controversial—session hopping. Some suggest that it is rude to move from one session to another to hear individual papers. Once you are in a session, they say, you are compelled to stay for the duration. I

disagree. Session hopping is a well-established practice (in North America, at least), especially for sessions whose papers are not thematically related or at conferences as large as AERA's, where multiple sessions of interest—and on similar topics—overlap. Experienced presenters are not offended by the audience's comings and goings, but attendees should, nonetheless, minimize the distractions they cause while moving. If you know you are going to leave the session, for example, sit near the door or an aisle, so that there are fewer knees and book bags to stumble over. If you arrive in the middle of a presentation, stay near the back of the room or slip in unobtrusively. And finally, leave between presentations, not while someone is speaking. (Note, however, that presenters who go beyond the time limit automatically forfeit this consideration.)

2. Ask questions about the papers.

The purpose of setting aside time for questions and answers is obvious: to allow for questions and answers. Yet just as discussants sometimes make remarks that have little to do with the papers themselves, audience members sometimes ask questions that presenters cannot answer meaningfully. These include philosophical questions ("Why doesn't the government care about the education of our children?"), questions meant for everyone and no one ("Do any of you have any thoughts about how to motivate students to learn chemistry?"), or requests for information that presenters are unlikely to know ("How many students in your study had ever been to the ocean?"). These are questions best addressed individually, after the presentation, or perhaps over a drink in the hotel bar.

The best questions ask for elaboration on the papers themselves and address issues that most audience members will find interesting. For empirical research, such questions often relate to methodology or implications, both of which frequently get short shrift in a 15- or 12-minute presentation (e.g., "You said that students' journals didn't provide much data—why was that?" or "Can you explain how teacher education programs might need to change, based on your findings?"). For papers that are more theoretical or conceptual, questions may aim at the same kind of synthesis expected of discussants, particularly by asking for

greater contextualization of the ideas discussed (e.g., "Do you think these perspectives challenge the concept of pedagogical content knowledge?"). In either case, questions should move the conversation along—we should understand the issues raised by the papers better after the question is answered.

3. Focus on the presenters.

Sometimes it seems as though audience members are speaking only because they could not get on the program themselves; hence, they decide to deliver the paper they *would* have presented had they been given the chance. Obviously, the question-and-answer portion of a session is not the place for such grandstanding. It is not the time to share your personal responses, your teaching experiences, or your confessional tales; and it certainly is not the time to expound on your own research findings or theoretical constructs. If you sincerely think presenters would benefit from your insights, then talk to them afterward—but do not make the rest of us suffer through it.

One sure index of audience members' true focus is the length of their questions. A typical question-and-answer period is 15 minutes, and answers to some questions must be spread across three or four panelists. The more time that audience members take in asking their questions, the less time presenters have to respond—and the less opportunity the remainder of the audience has to learn something. A good question takes no more than 30 seconds; if it is any longer, other audience members will turn around and start to stare—and believe me, they are not admiring your eloquence. A good question also draws attention to presenters, not to the questioner. Focus on yourself, and everyone will notice you—but not in a positive way. Focus on presenters, and everyone may forget that you spoke—but you will have made a material contribution to the session's success.

Conclusion

Annual conferences such as those of the American Educational Research Association play a critical role in developing the scholarship of our field. Although we may tell ourselves that the real work gets done during informal collaboration and networking, we would do well to remember that sessions are

at the heart of the conference experience. Sessions bring our private work into the public sphere; sessions force us to develop our nascent ideas into formal propositions; sessions expose us to colleagues and ideas that we might not encounter over the dinner table or at our own institutions. Although informal contact at a conference may facilitate professional discourse, sessions *are* professional discourse. Along with publications, conference sessions are the primary means by which ideas circulate among the members of our field. Conferences exist so that we can engage in meaningful conversations.

When we enter into the public sphere in this way, we take on new responsibilities. Rather than remaining content with habits that are simply convenient or personally gratifying, we must engage in practices that contribute to the health of the entire academic community. As discussants, for example, we must forego temptations of ill-preparedness or self-indulgence and provide the kind of reflective synthesis that benefits both audience and presenters. As session chairs, we may have to rattle our colleagues' feelings when we remind presenters to submit papers on time or when we cut off rambling observations during question-and-answer periods. And as audience members, we should stimulate discussion rather than call attention to ourselves or ask questions of narrow interest. Regardless of our role, the quality of public conversations depends on our commitment to the greater good of the academic community. And, ultimately, our ability to benefit from the intellectual engagement of a conference depends on our willingness to embrace goals that reach beyond individual interests.

For sessions to reach their potential as engaging spaces for scholarly discourse, we need to take our public responsibilities seriously. Speakers must prepare presentations that are intellectually sound and effectively delivered, but discussants, chairs, and audience members also should recognize their duties and attempt to live up to them. This is not to say that all sessions must follow the same format or that all participants must adhere to the same rules of participation. AERA encourages diverse formats for sessions, and the field would no doubt benefit from a wider variety of available conversations. Most AERA sessions, however,

continue to follow the traditional format of three or four speakers, a discussant, and a question-and-answer period. They are likely to do so for a long time to come. Such sessions will serve as meaningful intellectual experiences only if we commit ourselves to making contributions that advance the conversations of our fields.

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