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

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What makes a symposium successful? Since that question has so many possible answers, it is like an onion in some ways. This paper contrasts two paradigms regarding academic conferences, then analyzes a recent conference by Toyo University's Institute of Human Sciences. The article concludes with three suggestions for hosting 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 often it appears they were "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. Quite likely, the symposia of antiquity were highly 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 some glimpses of how ancient symposia might have been. Kluth (1997, par. 2) and Dwyer (2002, par. 3) suggest 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, tropologically, and anagogically." Such remarks suggest that uninspired academic discourse has a long, venerable tradition.

Two centuries after Erasmus questioned, "What does all this trumpery drive at?" the 86th Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Seeker, described the tedium of the academic assemblies in which "only the old philosophy of the schools was taught . . . and that neither ably nor diligently" (Ward & Waller, 1907).

The predominant paradigm of most academic conferences – at least in the West – regarded knowledge 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 rather than active participants in the process of meaning construction (Palmer, 1998, quoted in Yero, 2002, p. 101). Generally, 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 it efficiently. This is one of the reasons that Aronowitz (2000) cautions against regarding universities as mere "knowledge factories":

> 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 the knowledge-as-a-product paradigm is flawed surface 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 all types of educational gatherings. His 'Principles for Facilitating Teaching and Study' from the *Didactica Magna* (1633-1638) offer worthy insights for organizing academic events. Towards the end of his life, Comenius condensed his educational precepts to three basic principles (Bovet, 1943, p. 196 quoted by Piaget, 1993, p. 180). Those points can be rephrased in the context 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, request clarification so that they can make their own self-discoveries in a spirit of "auto-praxis".

Though Comenius' vision of "teaching all things to all men" never was realized, his ideas 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), most college students born somewhere between 1984 - 2002 tend to exhibit these learning characteristics:

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

2. They generally want to know what specific 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: they will make efforts only if clear rewards are identified. 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 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. Options often extend to the hi-tech field: in addition to standard class lectures, some want digital interactions with teachers/peers and a chance to do "extra credit" projects in lieu of the suggested course of study.

4. Many students now prefer learning-centered environments over 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. They are accustomed to assessment against external criteria. This is a generation that has been brought up with lots of external performance tests as well as self- and peer-evaluations. They tend to be 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, some of these characteristics are true of learners of different ages and not all of them apply to those between ages 16-25 at the time of this writing. However, Taylor argues there is frequently a mismatch between the preferred learning styles of the bulk of Generation Y-ers 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 generally short attention spans. Though his comments are based on experiences with university students in the USA, many of today's university-age Japanese students share at least some of the characteristics noted by Taylor.

A Sample Symposium

Let me now briefly comment on a symposium offered on October 25, 2008 by Toyo University's Institute of Human Science. Though some of these remarks are critical, the event itself was a typical small-scale conference in many respects. The problems identified here are likely endemic to many academic events, particularly those sponsored by a single body in a large university.

(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 I.H.S. symposium, 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. 25th 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. 25th 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 some 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 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 study abroad. Indirectly that seemed correct, but the written feedback suggests that most informants did not feel the symposium content 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 a 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 – seem to 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, 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 metaphor introduced at the start of this paper, we can see that academic symposia are multi-layered onion-esque affairs. The outer appearance of such events represents merely one superficial layer. Those involved in organizing such events need to deal with many additional layers. Though preparing conferences for a broad audience is often a challenge, if we focus more on process the results might be more tantilizing.

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