Creating learning at conferences through participant involvement

Presented at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting
August 3-8, 2007, in Philadelphia, Pa., USA

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Abstract

The typical conference is brimming with PowerPoint presentations that leave very little time for participant involvement. Students of learning have long abandoned the transfer model that underlies this massive show of one-way communication. We propose an alternative theory of the conference as a forum for learning, mutual inspiration and "human co-flourishing". We offer five design principles that specify how conferences may involve participants more and hence increase their learning. In the research and development effort reported here, our team collaborated with conference organizers in Denmark to introduce a variety of simple learning techniques related to the design principles at thirty real conferences of some 100-200 participants each. We present twelve of these techniques and the data evaluating them and conclude that by spending a fraction of the time at a conference on involving participants in various forms of reflective conversation and knowledge sharing, conference organizers may enhance the satisfaction and learning-related outcomes experienced by their participants.

Introduction

Conferences are a source of knowledge and inspiration to many managers and knowledge workers. While going to a full-day conference put on by a government agency, professional association or commercial conference organizer may not be part of the typical training-and-development program, it is nevertheless a common avenue for professional development.

As anyone who attends such conferences knows, they typically consist of a series of 20-45-minute presentations interspersed with 5-10-minute periods for questions and answers. Considering what is known about learning today, we may well question the efficacy of such massive one-way communication. While there has been extensive experimentation pretty much everywhere else in the educational world, the conference, seen as a forum for learning, stills pegs the learner in the role of passive receiver of information.

While there is ample room for critical studies of the lecture-crammed conferences as a source of knowledge for professionals, the purpose of the research presented in this paper was to design and test alternatives to the classical conference format. Presented with an opportunity to experiment with conferences held by corporate and professional meeting organizers, our group at Learning Lab Denmark put a research-and-development project together to test a number of learning techniques that activate and involve conference participants so as to help them learn more from the occasion.

We were inspired by a group of executives from eight Danish hotels and meeting venues to use the term "the learning meeting" (WoCo, 2004; Ravn 2007). We deepened the meaning of this concept by devising a theory of the conference as a forum for "human co-flourishing", and we formulated four design principles for learning conferences. A dozen processes and activities intended to enhance the participants' learning at conferences were conceptually related to these four principles. In collaboration with some of the Danish venues and their corporate clients, we implemented these techniques and evaluated their results, as reported below.

The traditional conference

Extensive literature searches have turned up virtually no research on the conference as a learning forum. Diplomatic conferences have long been studied by historians (Capes, 1960) and so have UN-type conferences (Schechter, 2001), but their purpose, of course, is primarily political debate and decision-making, not knowledge sharing or learning. With the advent of the internet, electronic conferencing became on object of study (Weedman, 1999), but the absence of face-to-face communication makes the electronic conference a whole different kettle of fish.

There is quite a literature on search conferences and dialogue conferences (Nielsen, forthcoming), as well as on other large-group interventions (Bunker and Alban, 1996), world café methods (Brown et al., 2005) and so on. However, conferences such as these gather people for consensus building, strategizing and decision-making around a shared concern. This corporate or collective orientation makes such events different from our focus on the conference that caters to knowledge-seeking individuals from many different organizations.

In blogosphere, there have been recent critiques of traditional conferences for software developers and other IT professionals. Organizers have experiments with other conference forms, variously named unconference, brain jam, bar camp and hypercamp (Wikipedia: "unconference" for sources). These alternative conference types are promising and still unfolding.

In the absence of research on the traditional conference as a learning forum we wish to offer five points of critique of it:

1. **Too much lecturing, too little learning**. Focus is on the messages that the speakers bring, not on what participants get out of it. There is very little time or opportunity for the audience to digest the information provided.

2. **The panel of experts is just more one-way communication**. A panel is often composed of experts who were not invited to present, so they are eager to get their points across. For every question taken from the audience, several panelists often feel called upon to provide extensive answers.

3. **Group work is often pointless and frustrating**. Groups are often fairly large, 8-12 people, with no one to facilitate. The purpose is often just to discuss a topic for its own sake, not to produce anything. The conversation is easily dominated by at few people while the rest withdraw in boredom.

4. **The workshop is a misnomer**. Workshops are the organizers' way of cramming more lectures in; they are simply concurrent lectures to subgroups of participants. Typically, no other learning method is employed.

5. **Networking is too important to be left to the breaks**. Learning is also about acquiring the contacts and seizing the opportunities that will expand one's range of successful action. Thus, making the acquaintance of useful strangers is key, yet conference organizers do very little to help people network.

As is evident from these points, the assumptions about learning underlying the traditional conference are those of the transfer model, well-known from classroom teaching (Illeris, 2004) and mathematical communication theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). Information has been transmitted successfully and learning has taken place when information from the active sender, as encoded in his message, has been absorbed in exactly the same form by the passive receiver.

This model and its various assumptions about the human mind have been critiqued extensively over the past decades, whether mind and memory have been couched as a tabula rasa for the senses to write on (Pinker, 2002), as a passive container that a teacher or a parent may fill up (Illeris, 2004) or as a von Neumann computer with an information storage device (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986).

For our present purposes, let us simply heed its shortcomings and move on to consider an alternative conceptualization of learning suitable for the conference as a learning forum.

Theory and design principles: The conference as a forum for human co-flourishing

If people are not empty vessels to be filled with knowledge, what are they? Well, one classical model says that people have potentials that are to be unfolded. Aristotle (1962, I, 7) found the *telos* of human life to be *eudaimonia*, human flourishing (Paul, Miller and Paul, 1999), the blossoming of every talent and virtue a person might possess.

In modern terms, we may say that people have innate needs and potentials that call for expression and realization (Maslow, 1968, Deci and Ryan, 2000). If needs go unsatisfied or potentials are thwarted, physical and psychological suffering ensues (UNDP, 2005). To be human is to realize one's potentials—for thought, feeling, locomotion, communication, socially responsible action, etc.

In this view, to learn is to become better able to meet one's needs and realizes one's potentials. Learning is about acquiring action knowledge in the pragmatic sense of being able to act with still more intelligence and efficacy (Dewey, 1929, Argyris, 1982, Schon, 1983). Our learning is greatest where our potentials for successful action are experienced as most pressing, that is, in our zone of proximal development, where we are just about to go (Vygotsky, 1978).

Motivation and relevance were the big terms in psychology and educational theory 30-50 years ago, and they remain pertinent: Facts that a learner experiences as irrelevant are not easily picked up. If a learner is unable to relate the material taught to the projects she wants to pursue, that is, to the realization of her personal or professional potentials, she learns less than she could.

Further, learning is not an individual affair, confined to individual brains; it is socially embedded and culturally mediated. We learn from interactions with other people and our learning may be facilitated if we are in a community of learners (Wenger, 1998).

These are some basic points about human learning gleaned over the past century or so. Various forums for learning have been studied extensively: the classroom, the kindergarten, the shop floor, the office, the training and development program—but apparently not the conference.

Elsewhere, we have developed the learning-theoretical basis for the conference (Ravn, 2007; Elsborg and Ravn, 2007). For here, suffice it to say that in its capacity as a social venue for people seeking new knowledge, a conference may be seen as a forum for human co-flourishing, for personal learning as well as mutual inspiration. People go to pick up new ideas and insights, and they generally want to meet other people to see if they share interests with them.

If a conference really were to be a forum for such co-flourishing, what should it look like? What elements must a conference have to stimulate the kind of learning that helps people pursue their projects, unfold their potentials and flourish as humans? We started out with four design principles for a learning conference (and, after the research, we added a fifth, to which we will return):

Design Principle 1: Presentations must be concise

No conference without presentations, but they must be concise, provocative, few and properly spaced (not packed—so as to provide time for reflection and learning). Research as well as common experience indicates that people can concentrate on listening to a typical lecture for about 30 minutes (Bligh, 2000).

Design principle 2. Active interpretation

Participants must be given opportunities engage in active interpretation and discussion of the information provided during presentation. They must have time and occasion to relate it to their ongoing concerns, to test it mentally and examine it in the light of what they already know and what they want to accomplish professionally. A brief Q-and-A session for a hundred people that lets three of them ask a question is not enough. Other forms of reflection and interpretation must be provided by the conference organizers.

Design Principle 3: Self-formulation

The conference must offer opportunities for participants to talk about the concerns that brought them to the conference in the first place. People go to conferences because they are involved in work or projects related to the conference topic and they want to discuss these projects at the conference. Talking about one's ongoing concerns with others involved in similar projects can contribute significantly to learning, and conferences should be designed to allow for this.

Design Principle 4: Networking and knowledge sharing

There must be processes and activities that help participants find people they are likely to enjoy meeting and sharing knowledge with. Outgoing Americans may know how to work a room, but many Europeans are too shy to circulate and so must be sped along.

Method: Testing learning techniques

Armed with this modern theory of learning and the associated design principles, we recruited five meeting organizers and meeting venues to obtain access to large meetings and conferences where aspects of the theory could be put to the test. In actual practice, is it possible to implement design principles such as these and create conferences that are more like forums for human co-flourishing than traditional conferences? This was our research-and-development question.

As is apparent, our approach is akin to action research, in that we seek to take action and transform some small part of the world as we study it. Elsewhere, we have detailed the "transformative" methodology used (Ravn, 2005; Baburoglu and Ravn, 1992); the present section merely summarizes it. Our transformative aspirations are mirrored by other recent innovations in social research methodology, such as "design science" in organizational research (van Aken, 2005; Romme, 2003), "design-based research" in educational inquiry (Cobb et al., 2003) and "intervention research" in social services (Rothman and Thomas, 1994). All assume that social researchers can do more than describe and explain social reality; they can and should help transform it.

Our partners were three Danish hotels, one congress center and one large bank, which was a major customer at some of the hotels. We were given access to 30 conferences with some 100-500 participants in each. The conferences included orientation for new employees in the bank, one-day regional "growth" conferences for the bank's customers, two-day professional-education type conferences for social workers, health-care professionals, IT-specialists or lawyers, the annual meeting for a corporate sports association, annual half-day meetings where the CEO presents strategy to the rank-and-file.

Our group at Learning Lab Denmark included two consultants*, one researcher (the second author) and the project director (the first author). We were all knowledgeable about theory, methodology and practical facilitation and learning techniques and collaborated as a team during the whole project. However, the task of introducing and implementing the techniques at the 30 conferences were reserved for the consultants, while evaluation fell to the researcher.

The consultants would discuss meeting design with each conference organizer and introduce as much redesign of the "learning-conference" variety as was possible, given frequent hesitation and doubt on the part of the organizers. Once these innovations and changes to the program were negotiated, the consultants would brief the conference host or facilitator on how to introduce and implement the various learning techniques. To support the execution of each conference, consultants, conference organizers and facilitators produced a multi-page "script", detailing by five-minute intervals all stage directions, speaker introductions, talking points, instructions for learning techniques, breaks, etc.

Almost twenty distinct techniques were used. For inclusion in the present report, they had to be significant, used on several occasions, and subject to some measure of evaluation. They include:

1. Concise presentations
- Break up the presentation midway
- The presentation as an interview

2. Active interpretation
- Mini-meetings
- The constructive opening question
- The question card
- The speaker's cornered

3. Self-formulation
- Participants direct the speaker
- Two consultants, free of charge

* We acknowledge our colleagues Nina Tange and Malene Rix.

4. Networking and knowledge sharing

- Meet people
- Find a new seat
- A networking lunch
- Medium-sized group tables

To determine the efficacy of each technique the researcher employed four data sources:

1. Evaluative questionnaires completed by conference participants
2. Interviews and conversations with conference organizers and facilitators after the conferences
3. “Reflective scripts”: During and after the conference, the consultant would observe the performance of the facilitator and the reactions of the audience and making extensive notes on her copy of the script.
4. The researcher’s observations, made from his seat in the auditorium.

For a technique to be efficacious, it must contribute to learning in the manner specified by our theory of the learning conference as a forum for human co-flourishing. How to determine whether learning has taken place, however, is a complex question that finds easy answers only in simplistic theories of learning—such as the transfer model and the associated fact-retention test of the multiple-choice variety. None of the thirty conferences had content that lent itself to such testing; few of the participants would likely have welcomed exit tests of their comprehension of the “syllabus”; no employers paying for their personnel to attend conferences such as these are known to demand such tests.

What proved possible was piggybacking on the evaluation forms that many conference organizers administer at the conclusion of events: We inserted items assessing the new learning techniques employed. We assume that people really do go to conferences to learn and become inspired and pick up ideas and useful tools. So, when respondents say they were satisfied with a particular conference activity, we assume they mean it contributed to their learning.

The response categories for all questionnaire items were expressed as Likert-like five-point scales with a neutral midpoint. We report combined percentages in the two top categories (usually “Very satisfied” and “Satisfied”).

As this project was a live action research experiment with interventions big and small crawling all over, the survey data sometimes support our other data, sometimes deviate from it, as will appear from the results section. Thus, we often let the survey data play a merely supportive role.

Summing up, the methodology we used merits the term transformative (Ravn, 2005) in that we try to transform a domain (that of conferences) in a research-based way. Unlike consultants and other change agents, we started our change efforts from a theoretically informed basis; one that included a humanistic view of the human potential and pragmatist concepts of knowledge production and learning. Our theory of the learning conference as a forum for human co-flourishing is obviously not a theory of the way the world is, but of the way it *could* be. Cf. Argyris' statement: "A complete description of reality requires not only a description of the universe as it is but also of its potential for significantly reformulating itself" (1982, p. 469).

From this transformative theory we derived four design principles and twenty-odd learning techniques. Each learning technique is a hypothesis that if participants do what the facilitator invites them to, they will enjoy learning and experience co-flourishing. Implementing a technique is the same as testing the hypothesis it expresses. In eliciting participants' judgment of the technique and observing their behavior on the floor, we are ascertaining whether the hypothesis is borne out, must be rejected, amended, etc.

Our research is thus theory-based, hypothetico-deductive (in a fashion), and experimental. However, we are not concerned with explaining reality, as research with these characteristics usually is, but with transforming it.

Results and discussion

We present the twelve learning techniques for which there are sufficient data to judge their efficacy. Each is placed under the design principle it bears out.

Design principle 1: Concise presentations

The point that presentations should be concise and short is widely recognized in the conference industry; many presentations at business conferences now last only 15-20 minutes. Likewise, it will come as no surprise that presenters who had solid and interesting content as well as a lively and entertaining style were rated favorably in this project. Observations like these were not our focus of interest; instructors of presentation skills know this all too well (Bienvenu, 1999).

We found room for two learning techniques here:

Technique 1. Break up the presentation midway

Many presentations were originally programmed to last 40-60 minutes. However, after 20 or 30 minutes of passive listening, many people become distracted and their minds start wandering.

To remedy this challenge to learning, we asked a number of presenters at the corporate conferences to break up their longish presentations in two, which, on the whole, they did. Various audience activities were introduced in the short breaks provided (as we shall see below), giving participants the chance to discuss the lecture topic.

We suspected this device to go largely unnoticed by participants and so could not ask a survey question about it. However, observations confirmed the value of these breaks: many participants perked up visibly, those about to nod off seemed to get a second wind. By and large, the presenters seemed enjoy starting up afresh after the break, speaking to more attentive faces. No presenters indicated afterwards that they would have preferred to speak non-stop.

Technique 2: The presentation as an interview

To introduce variation into a string of presentations already scheduled for some of the corporate meetings, we suggested that the television journalist hired to moderate the conferences interview one of the presenters. The presenter was freed from his duty to prepare a PowerPoint presentation and would happily settle into one of the easy chairs provided on stage. From the other chair, the journalist would ask the few questions necessary to get the expert going. The tone of the conversation was friendly and appreciative, designed to bring out the presenter’s message.

After some 10 or 15 minutes, the journalist would turn to the audience, take a few questions and thus sense the participants’ interests and try to guide the conversation accordingly.

The conversational style of this kind of “presentation” presumably helps the participants listen and understand the content. We have no survey data on this technique (it was introduced late in the process), but observations indicate it was fairly successful. As mentioned, the interviewer was a professional journalist; interviewing proficiency seems essential here.

Conclusions about concise presentations

Design principle 1, making the presentation concise, was hardly put to the test in this project. But the two techniques mentioned, one very simple and one requiring real competence, suggest that much more can be done to enhance the learning potentials of the traditional presentation.

Design principle 2: Active interpretation

Passive listening to concise presentations only gets you so far. We hypothesized that participants' understanding of presentations is greatly enhanced if they are encouraged to mesh what they hear with what they know already.

A facilitator can make this happen by asking the participants, at appropriate intervals during the day, to spend a few minutes in silent reflection and note-taking or engage in five or ten minutes of reflective conversation with their neighbors. While we failed to persuade any of our partners to try the silent reflection, we did have occasion to test the reflective conversation, which we called a mini-meeting.

Technique 3: Mini-meetings

A mini-meeting is a conversation between two to four participants, introduced by the conference facilitator during a break in the presentation, or at the end of it. At our request, the facilitators used this device at practically all the conferences, one to five times a day, for periods varying between two and fifteen minutes.

A mini-meeting calls on people to think actively and articulate their thoughts. The mental ordering required for you to say something reasonably coherent about a topic improves your understanding of it. To a large extent, what you say out loud is what you remember. Further, listening to another person's interpretation of the presentation may deepen your own. It is a way for conference organizers to begin to include participants' perspectives and giving them more of a voice, literally.

Mini-meetings were typically introduced by the facilitator by words to this effect: "Now, I would like you all to spend a little time talking to the person sitting next to you about what you found inspiring or provocative in the presentation. Please, go ahead!"

The observational data on this technique are positive. Just hearing a hundred voices rise within five seconds is exciting and creates the impression that there is much potential, initiative and experience gathered in the room. Facilitators and conference organizers were unequivocally pleased with the mini-meetings, not only for the liveliness introduced, but also for the improved quality of the questions raised subsequently.

The survey data are a bit more ambiguous. For technical reasons, the item about the mini-meetings was only asked at about half the meetings. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents considered this opportunity to talk about the presentation to be very good or good, which is one of our lowest scores, and 42% were indifferent.

When we asked in more general terms about how participants rated "the opportunity to enter into dialog with the other participants", sixty-nine percent indicated they were good or very good. This dialog was, for the most part, established through the mini-meetings. This more comprehensive, but also less precise survey item compensates for the fact that the mini-meetings were only five- or ten-minute periods which, due to their brevity, obviously do not make as much of an impression as, say, a 45-minute lecture.

A very small minority expressed their dissatisfaction with mini-meetings to this effect: "I paid big money to get access to these experts today, so why should I chat with the next guy who needs the facts as much as I do?" Evidently, all change will meet with some resistance. The challenge for change agents is to keep minority opposition in perspective. Reactions such as these, few as they were, nevertheless suggest that there is a time and place for audience participation; and there *are* participants who are so motivated for factual transfer that they are better left alone.

Technique 4: The constructive opening question

We learned during the project that *the nature* of the facilitator's opening questions matters a lot. Before we became aware of this, some facilitators would start off the mini-meetings in this way, "Discuss with your partner what you think the stated mission of our association is" or "What results do you think we got from market survey X?". Of course, participants obediently set out to answer the questions as best they could, as they always do, but questions like these irked us. They seemed to derive from the transfer model, as if the presenter would say, "You have learned something only if your knowledge is the same as mine."

We phased out such old-school exam questions about factual matter. Instead, we asked facilitators to appeal to participants' subjective experience of that they found inspiring, useful or memorable: "What piqued your interest? What did you find to be useful in what the presenter said? How is the presentation relevant to your own professional concerns?" This is more in line with our learning model: we learn not by acquiring and retaining knowledge-as-facts, but by picking up and integrating material that is relevant to the intentions and projects we have, things that will help us flourish and unfold our potentials.

The observational data on the constructive question are not the strongest. Interviews of participants may have elicited more specific judgments. However, our observations indicated that the constructive spin had a positive effect on the conversational tone of meetings where it was used. In many cases, it proved contagious. Participants seemed to be more inclined to explore issues in an open and inquiring manner when they had been repeatedly prompted by constructive opening questions.

Technique 5: The question card

Another way to invite participants to think about the presentation is to ask them to raise questions afterwards. Of course, Q-and-A's is a conference staple, but sometimes the speaker or the occasion is so intimidating to the audience that no one dares raise a question even when invited. Prior to our project, some of the corporate meetings with a couple of hundred employees went silent after the CEO's hour-long presentation. Typically, the facilitator could take only about five seconds of this before he pulled his own list of questions to ask; after which the audience was dismissed, to everyone's dissatisfaction.

One of our partners solved this by providing index cards and pens to the audience beforehand. Seated in groups of four or six, participants would be given five minutes to discuss questions they would like to ask and write them down. This invariably produced questions on scores of index cards. They were passed up to the facilitator, who would read the questions and ask them on the spot—or after a break, which allowed for some screening and selection. On other occasions, a co-facilitator would walk around among participants with a microphone and ask them what they wrote on their cards, chatting a little, loosening people up and then posing the question to the CEO. On still other occasions, participants kept the cards and used them as manuscripts to ask their questions directly.

The survey response varied. Most participants (56%) rated this opportunity good or very good; a few (6%) were directly against it, some (38%) were indifferent. Judging from our observations, the question cards seemed more meaningful in provincial towns than in the capital of Copenhagen, where people maybe are more inclined to speak up. On the whole, the facilitators, who were self-confident journalists, wanted a more mature, direct dialog, rather than cards. In sum, it proved to be a useful technique for an otherwise passive or shy audience.

Technique 6: The speaker's cornered

After a presentation, a speaker typically shuts down her PowerPoint presentation, picks up her things and is ready to leave. A few participants often approach the podium, wishing to ask questions, and the ensuing conversation sometimes ends up interfering with the facilitator's preparations for the next speaker.

To get the most out of the speaker before she leaves the conference, we suggested to conference organizers that they provide a tall cocktail table in the lobby outside the auditorium for the speaker to retreat to after the presentation. Armed with a pitcher of ice water and Hershey's kisses, she would receive questions from the handful of people motivated to approach her. While people were waiting their turn, they would often chat with each other, meaning that this expedient helped participants meet and network with like-minded people—forming, as it were, a proto-Special Interest Group.

Before the lecture, the facilitator would announce that the speaker would be thus available for questions afterwards. In a few cases, this option came in handy: When questions asked in the auditorium after the lecture proved demanding, eccentric, irrelevant or otherwise unwelcome, the facilitator or the speaker could refer them to the lobby afterwards in a respectful manner.

The survey data on this is scant. Due to the inconspicuousness of the technique we only had occasion to include a survey item on this point at one conference, where 91% of the participants rated it as good or very good and none gave it a negative rating. Our observations and feedback from facilitators and conference organizers were in agreement that this was an effective, inexpensive and unobtrusive way of providing speaker access to the most dedicated fraction of the participants.

Conclusions about active interpretation

Four techniques tested our design principle that in a learning conference, participants must be given special opportunities for actively dealing with the input provided.

The response was favorable. The survey data proved spotty in some cases, but researcher observations and feedback from facilitators and conference organizers consistently show these techniques to be helpful: participants get to interact more with presenters, talk to others about their understandings and just generally become more active and involved—all indications that conditions for learning are improved.

However, there was evidence that some proportion of conference participants, especially at the expensive, open, class-like conferences, were more comfortable with what we came to designate the "professional cinema": The conference as an intellectual show where you can lean back and receive professionally relevant entertainment.

Design principle 3: Self-formulation

The techniques implementing this design principle allow participants to bring up their own concerns, not just in response to input from presenters, but as independent issues worthy of consideration. This is something rarely admitted at the ordinary conference, where the message to be delivered by the expensive speakers rule the day.

Technique 7: Participants direct the speaker

This activity gave participants a chance to decide which topics would be treated at the conference. During a break in a presentation, the facilitator would have the participants break into groups of four to eight people to discuss where they would like the speaker to go after the break. During this half-hour discussion, the groups would raise the issues they brought to the meeting, develop some shared concerns and write them on a flip cart to be hung on the wall in the auditorium. The speaker would then tour the flip charts, take note of recurrent issues and address them in a conversational manner during the remainder of his presentation.

This activity was used in one series of corporate orientation meetings for new employees. The HR manager would present his expectations of the new employees and they were asked about their expectations of the bank: what kind of workplace would they like the bank to be?

The HR manager, the facilitator and the meeting organizers reported that the flip-chart feedback and the plenary conversation were very instructive and useful. This activity has now become a staple at these meetings.

The researcher’s observations were that this activity changed the tone of the meeting fundamentally. Previously, the new employees would listen quietly to a day-long inflow of information about the bank, which was what they expected and were comfortable with. After this group activity was introduced, the mood of the meeting clearly picked up, as people were given to the chance to be active and contribute. Participants were livelier and seemed more at ease and attentive during the rest of the day—clear indications that conditions for learning were better.

The survey response was middling. Participants were asked to rate the opportunities given to them to enter into dialog with the speakers and so direct them. Only 36% rated this good or very good, and 15% rated it poor or very poor. The researcher's observations tempered this mediocre reception. The opportunity to influence the speaker's further contributions did have an observable positive impact on the mood in the audience, especially when compared with other meetings that left participants uninvolved. However, whether it was the specific form that the group work took or just the chance to speak and participate that did it remains somewhat uncertain.

Technique 8. Two consultants, free of charge

In order to give participants another opportunity to bring their own professional concerns to bear on the conference proceedings, we tried to introduce an activity we call "You have won two consultants, free of charge." This is a modification of the supervision activity called a "reflecting team" (Tom Andersen, 1991), adapted to the conference format.

After proper instructions, participants are divided into groups of three, A, B and C. The groups spend half an hour together. For the first ten minutes, A presents a current professional challenge that she would like feedback on from B and C. Then she goes silent as B and C start producing ideas and advice for A. B and C are instructed to not look at her and speak this advice to each other, talking appreciatively about her in the third person. Meanwhile, A listens, poker-faced, and takes note of the few ideas she can use. For the last ten minutes, A speaks again. She identifies the best idea and refrains from addressing all the useless ideas; she just lets them go. B and C help her become clearer about the one idea she liked; they are her consultants or coaches, helping her hone her determination about what to do about her professional challenge.

We used this activity in two settings. In one, we told the conference facilitator how to instruct the participants, which she proceeded to do in a fairly superficial way. The activity that resulted appeared to be somewhat like a group discussion of one member's challenge, roaming freely, without the distinctions between phases and the discipline of who speaks when. Nevertheless, the participants enjoyed the chance to talk to each other and to focus on a problem one of them had. Surveyed, 75% of participants rated it good or very good, while 9% of participants gave it a negative reaction.

In the other setting, one of our team (the first author) was introduced on stage by the facilitator at the appropriate moment, the idea being that this activity was so complex as to require instruction by an expert. We did this on three occasions: two were failures (participants did not show up at the required time or proved so unwilling during instructions that the activity was doomed), one barely scraped by. Even in the latter case some participants chose not to take part in the activity.

Conclusions about self-formulation

When participants were given a bit of a platform to air the concerns that motivated them to go the conference in the first place, were their outcomes improved? “Participants direct the speaker” was reasonably successful and may be recommended as one of many ways to involve participants in group work.

“Two consultants” did not go down so well. If meeting organizers want participants to play a role this much larger than is commonly the case in conferences, participants must be told and prepped meticulously. An important lesson is the necessity of proper facilitation: trust, humor, the friendly atmosphere that secures participant buy-in. More about this below.

Design principle 4: Networking and knowledge sharing

The techniques that follow help people learn from each other at conferences, thus bringing out the substantial knowledge resources present not only on the podium, but in the audience as well. Cultural factors may make expedients such as these seem more required in Europe than in America. In Europe we don’t meet strangers that easily, and when we have met, we don’t know how to move on to the next person. Contact making and knowledge sharing are likely to benefit from facilitation.

Technique 9: Meet people

Having registered in the morning, most participants will find a seat for themselves and just sit there, waiting to be entertained.

At some of our conferences, we urged the facilitator to help participants get acquainted with each other. After a few introductory remarks, the facilitator would say, “Now, before we begin today’s program, I’d like to give you all a chance to meet some of the folks sitting around you. When I say “Go”, please spend five minutes introducing yourselves to three or four people sitting nearby. I’ll let you know when time’s up. Go ahead!”

Within seconds, a roar would rise from the auditorium, as everyone found someone to talk to. The change in the room was evident, people would warm themselves up and maybe meet someone they could reconnect with later, thus preparing the group for some useful networking. Afterwards, the facilitator had a better room temperature to work with and could get a head start establishing the safety and trust required for the participants to accept new learning techniques.

The facilitators and meeting organizers reported satisfaction with this small activity. Again, however, the activity was too inconspicuous to qualify for a separate item on the survey.

Technique 10: Find a new seat

To stimulate networking at some of the corporate conferences, the facilitator would instruct the participants before lunch: "At this point, you are probably wondering who the other people in this room are. In order to give you a chance to meet a few of them, I would like you all to find a new seat when you return from lunch. For this to be possible, please pick up your stuff and take it with you."

People were observed to do as told, by and large. A few relocated in pairs, presumably to retain good company. Some introductions were seen before start-up after lunch.

No survey data; the facilitators and meeting organizers liked it. It may be argued that this activity introduces an element of insecurity that would inhibit learning; this is to be balanced against the benefits obtainable from the extra networking opportunity.

Technique 11: A networking lunch

At a typical conference in Denmark, lunch involves long tables of 8-12 seats. Acquaintances band together merrily, while the many people who don't know anyone often sit in islands of silence for an hour. Hence the need for some facilitated networking.

At some of the conferences, we decided to split the long table into tables of four, on the expectation that no one would be left out of a group that small. Before lunch, the facilitator would ask people to find a table with people they didn't know. Each table had a menu card with conversation starters. People would spread out at the tables, some would ignore the menu cards, while others would pick up the conversation starters and talk as suggested.

The response was mixed. Most people seemed to appreciate the small-table opportunity, but a few reacted strongly to the menu cards, finding them childish and condescending.

At the corporate events for the new employees, lunch used to be a buffet with no tables provided. Being new to the organization, participants knew no one else and the silence would be deafening as people sought out the walls and hung over window sills alone. We introduced stand-up cocktail tables which enabled people to congregate in smaller groups, and this seemed to stimulate conversation. The survey response was favorable: Sixty-one percent of participants judged this to be a good or very good opportunity to network and share, while only 9% said it was poor or very poor. Facilitators and meeting organizers quickly picked up on this and institutionalized it for all further conferences.

Technique no. 12: Medium-sized group tables

A widely used alternative to theater seating is banquet, seating 8-12 people at a circular table. This is commonly believed to be a more interaction-friendly format than the unidirectional theater line-up and thus suitable for group work. However, with ten people in a group there is very little time for each to speak. Also, it is often difficult to hear across the large banquet table.

At the corporate orientation meetings with 100-300 employees, we started out with slim, rectangular tables seating six people on each side, the short side of the table turned towards the podium. Twelve quickly proved too big a group, and for the rest of the series, tables of six were used to great effect. Six is an acceptable size for one group and easily breaks into trios and dyads for the five-to-ten minute breaks during and after presentations. Six people are like a small dinner party, much safer than a daunting banquet table. Conversations were observed to flow more easily, and these small groups could produce question cards like nobody’s business. Facilitators and meeting organizers concurred.

Conclusions about networking and knowledge sharing

The four techniques in this section were quite successful, by observer standards. They are all minor and quite inconspicuous. At the end of the day, some participants probably don’t recall having been exposed to them, while others, as anecdotal evidence suggested, thought that the little twist provided by this or that technique made the day different and pleasant. The techniques can be implemented quite easily, but we do not wish to claim they are major contributions to learning at conferences.

Simple as they are, these techniques can indeed flop if introduced the wrong way. Thus, at one conference the facilitator, who was a novice, urged people to find new seats during a break, saying: “If you want to meet some of the other interesting people in the room, please find a new seat when you return from the break.” No one did. Why? One might surmise that choosing to leave your neighbor is like telling him he’s not interesting, and people may be too polite for that. Based on our observations, we were led to conclude that the seating change must not seem optional. The facilitator should take responsibility for it, thus making it socially acceptable to abandon one's neighbor.

Several experiences of this kind, where maladroit facilitation thwarted otherwise promising learning techniques, led us to modify the line-up of our four design principles by adding a fifth one:

Design principle 5: Facilitation

A major responsibility of the *traditional* conference host or moderator is to execute the program promptly: Start and finish the day and every presentation on time, introduce and thank speakers and moderate Q-and-A's.

For the learning conference, timekeeping is still of the essence. In addition, however, a facilitator must be able to create the kind of safe, friendly and spirited atmosphere that is most conducive to learning. Participants arrive at the conference expecting the usual string of lectures and passive listening. If the conference organizers want to stimulate learning in new ways, participants must be nudged and goaded to do things which at first may seem odd, contrived or even unpleasant. This requires tact, handholding and some measure of charm on the part of the facilitator.

The facilitator must establish her presence and explain her function first thing in the morning. She is more than timekeeper and the invisible glue between presentations. "My role today is also to make sure that you all get as much as possible out of the conference and the other resources and people that are present in this room. I hope to be able to give you all the chance to discuss and learn and be inspired as much as you expect."

Here are two routines relevant to this task that we helped the facilitators develop or refine:

Plucking. When break-out groups would return to the plenary, the facilitator would not ask them all to report on their work, as this becomes boring after three or four groups. She told the groups beforehand, "We will hear from some of you; I will pluck your feedback here and there." Groups that had been creative and happy waved their arms and were heard, and the few unproductive groups were let off the hook. The facilitator is not obliged to plough through any list of group representatives to the bitter end, but can stop before the energy in the room drops.

Bundling questions. During Q-and-A's some of our experienced facilitators would take several questions from the floor, chat with those asking questions and bundle a few questions for the presenter to answer. Often, this softened up the room and made people more comfortable; it sharpened diffuse questions and it gave the presenter a minute to prepare his answers.

At most of the conferences, participants were asked to rate the facilitator's ability to create dialog between participants and presenters. At a number of course-like conferences, where facilitators used plucking as well as bundling questions, facilitators were rated "Good" or "Very good" by 93% of respondents and "Poor" and "Very poor" by 0%. Corresponding numbers for traditional conferences, where facilitators did not use these routines, were 55% and 6%, respectively. This comparison must be taken with a grain of salt, since the two types of conferences differed along a number of other, possibly confounding dimensions, such as overall facilitator skill. Which, however, only goes to emphasize the point: learning techniques may look fine on paper, they may even work in one conference, but if they are not introduced and executed skillfully, by a facilitator who can persuade his audience, they may come to naught.

In our roles as consultants to the conference organizers and facilitators, we learned never to push facilitators into activities fancier than they could take ownership of. As a facilitator, you cannot convince a hundred participants to do something you don't really believe in or are not thoroughly familiar with. Once facilitators had experienced success in one conference with certain small steps, they would come back for more. (If the reader has found some of the techniques presented above somewhat unambitious, this is part of the explanation).

In contrast, when on a few occasions we arranged with the regular facilitator that they would step down and leave the podium to us, so that we could introduce a complex activity, we discovered that you cannot jump-start an audience after having dismissed their facilitator. A roomful of people has the level of trust and daring that the facilitator has managed to build up with them during the day. Consequently, three times we ended up forcing *process* (activities and learning techniques) down people's throats, just as we have critiqued adherents of the transfer model for pushing *content*.

Conclusions and implications for practice

At 30 conferences, typically involving some 100-200 participants each, we introduced a number of learning techniques intended to increase participant involvement and learning. Twelve of those techniques were reported here; the majority of them were received well by the participants. They may be assumed to have contributed positively to participant's learning and, in their own small way, to the mutual inspiration that we identified as an essential component of the human co-flourishing posited as the ideal for the conference as a learning forum.

Our data show that you can indeed change and improve the traditional, one-way communication format of the traditional conference. Only small steps proved possible in our conferences, but these small steps often had surprisingly large effects. A conference that starts by letting people spend five minutes saying hello to strangers seated near them and then, an hour later, allows for ten minutes of conversation in pairs before Q-and-A's will feel quite different and refreshing to most people. This effect may be created by simple means that require only an investment of 15 or 20 minutes out of a full day's conference.

Yet, we also discovered that techniques such as these, and especially more complex one like the "Two consultants, free of charge", must be introduced by a competent host or facilitator who has gained the participants' trust, so that they willingly go along with the innovations introduced. Our failures on several occasions to establish this trust in the room led us to propose a fifth design principle, competent facilitation.

Out of the four original design principles, the second received the most emphasis; the idea that there must be opportunities for active interpretation of the presentations. Ten-minute Q-and-A's are not enough, presumably because they still reserve the floor for one voice. Ask people to turn to the person sitting next to them and hold a mini-meeting, and everyone is talking about what they just heard and thought. Preparing a question by means of the "Question card" helps conversation along; a "Constructive opening question" helps steer people away from academic fault-finding and towards what truly inspired them in the presentation; and "The speaker's cornered" lets the dedicated minority mull over the presentation with the speaker and each other afterwards.

On the whole, our line of experiments bore out the four design principles—with the important qualification that the art of facilitation needs more attention than we originally allowed for. Our observations and other data sources strongly indicate that there is good sense in conceiving of the conference as a learning forum that not only requires good input (in the form of substantial and entertaining presentations), but also facilitated processes and activities that induce people to interpret actively what they hear, relate it to their ongoing interests and projects, and to share inspiration and knowledge with each other at the conference.

The major purpose of the transformative research methodology employed was to produce practical knowledge that can help practitioners improve and transform their domains. Thus, our research *is* the implications for practice. We couched our interventions in the form of methods and techniques, making a major point out of formulating them in the how-to form that practitioners generally find applicable (in Elsborg and Ravn, 2007). However, as was underscored repeatedly during the project, in themselves, techniques are not enough; they must be adapted to the situation at hand and applied using competent facilitation.

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