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Effective Techniques/Methods for Conference Presentations: Research Issues

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EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES/METHODS FOR CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS. RESEARCH ISSUES

John A. Henschke

ABSTRACT

Consistent pleas have been made for using participative techniques/methods in adult, continuing, community or extension education conference designs and presentations which assure more stimulating and proactive learning experiences. Despite these pleas, conference audiences, often quite large in number, are typically "treated" to lectures, papers, stilted presentations, etc., and have little opportunity for participation in the proceedings of the conference sessions. Nevertheless, many publications and one definition of "conference" suggest that although the degree of conference participativeness varies, the "better" ones have resource persons who not only imaginatively devise ways to obtain participants input via small group work as well as through reports from these same groups, but also help participants generate individual and organizational benefits resulting from "back-home" applications. Some however, still assert that there is no clear or convincing research evidence whether discussion and group participation techniques/methods produce any better conference learning results than more traditional one-way platform communication processes such as papers, lectures, films, recordings, etc. The major research issue of this paper relates to finding and/or generating evidence that may help determine which educational techniques/methods will produce the most effective results. One question that keeps nagging this author is: "What constitutes research?" Ten examples of adult learning activities in various contexts including conferences, drawn mostly from untypical sources are offered for consideration as research which supports the value of proactive participant involvement in conference sessions.

INTRODUCTION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE ISSUE

Consistent pleas have been made for using participative techniques/methods in adult, continuing, community or extension education conference designs and presentations which assure more stimulating and proactive learning experiences. Despite these pleas, conference audiences, often quite large in number, are typically "treated" to lectures, papers, stilted presentations, etc., and have little opportunity for participation in the proceedings of the conference sessions. Nevertheless, one definition of "conference" suggests that although the degree of conference participativeness varies, the "better" ones have resource persons who imaginatively devise ways to obtain participants input via small group work as well as through reports from these same groups. Many books and articles have been written on this topic, strongly and excitedly encouraging the use of adult education techniques/methods for enhancing the adult learners' conference participation as well as for generating individual and organizational benefits resulting from "back-home" applications.

In the midst of this plethora of prodding as well as providing descriptive "road maps" to accomplish increased participation, some still assert that there is no clear or convincing research evidence whether discussion and group participation techniques/methods produce any better conference learning results than more traditional one-way platform communication processes such as lectures, films, recordings, etc. The major research issue of this paper relates to finding and/or generating evidence that may help determine which educational techniques/methods will produce the most effective results.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS ISSUE TO BOTH RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN ADULT, CONTINUING, COMMUNITY AND EXTENSION EDUCATION

This issue is important to both research and practice. It has been argued (Henschke, 1987) that practice is the source which produces items to be researched. It also has somehow been assumed that research findings are the substance which informs practice in the conduct of conferences in these fields. If this is the case, then, it could be very helpful to actually determine whether there is, in fact, the apparent lack of research evidence regarding appropriate techniques/methods to use—traditional or participative.

Rosa (1992a) asserts that research into "facilitation" of adult learning is somewhat contradictory, surprisingly sparse, and fails to support the basic precepts. Hays' (1993) review of six current books on teaching adults appears to express throughout an uneasiness about writers' experiences, rather than research, being the primary source of the ideas and strategies they proposed. Rose (1992b) further contends that the amazingly sparse research into the effectiveness of these participative approaches have been inadequately studied, and there have been no studies about conference outcomes indicating effectiveness. However, one question that keeps nagging at this author is "what constitutes research—only that which is conducted formally and accepted for publication in places requiring strict formality?" This question also prompts others: "Is some evidence being overlooked which could help in answering this dilemma?"; "If practice is the grounding source for generating needs of research on the relative effectiveness of various kinds of educational techniques/methods, then practice could be helpful for innovating and improving conference presentations as well as guiding additional research on the effectiveness of various techniques/methods?" Although these and other questions may be asked, the primary one is "what constitutes research?" Much of the answer to this question has been in the positivist tradition, with more recent additions from interpretivism and critical theory. These have serious limitations as a source of guidance for teaching practice. However, it is here proposed for consideration that one answer to the above question may be: When the full implications of time, thought processes, testing, contextualizing and adoption of the adult educator's experience is studied as a primary source of the techniques/methods, ideas and strategies they use, this also could constitute research. Let us provide and analyze some important examples in the following section. These examples are taken from adult learning activities engaged and conducted in many settings, including within the narrow confines of conferences.

AN EXPLANATION OF MODELS OR AN ILLUSTRATION OF NEW INSIGHTS OR CHALLENGES ARISING FROM A DISCUSSION OF THE ISSUE

Amazingly little research evidence on the effectiveness of various conference educational techniques/ methods may be found in research journals or research conference proceedings where one would ordinarily look for such data. On the other hand, in the general books and articles written which encourage using participative strategies and techniques/methods, as well as in practitioners' reservoir of unpublished experience, ample research evidence supports participation and its effectiveness.

When Knowles (1989) hired a Harvard University astronomy professor to teach astronomy to adults at the Boston YMCA Adult Education Program in the 1930's, the participants disappeared after one session of the astronomer's reading his "dog-eared", yellow, university classroom notes to them. However, a following semester, Knowles located another Boston astronomer to work with the first group of participants. He assessed their learning needs and built the program in that class by taking them to the building roof on a cold star-lit night and having them point out the star systems they wished to learn about. As a result, the class grew in number, and Knowles learned the importance of having an instructor not only interested in the subject, but also interested in connecting the learning needs of the participants with topic at hand.

Wlodkowski (1985) has gathered together in one place the most research on enhancing motivation of adults to learn. Two criteria governed the inclusion of sixty-eight strategies he identifies in six phases of the motivation process. The first criterion for selection was that the technique/method was developed, tested and found to work as it was employed by someone else and the process as well as result published. The second criterion for selection was that the technique/method also worked for him as he employed it in his practice. If it didn't work "for him, it was not included. Sixty-eight strategies passed both tests. In this it was obvious that a personal ingredient of "goodness of fit" or "ability to apply" was added to whether a technique/ method had been just purely researched by someone else.

Meyer and Keefe (1990) acquired special funding to establish a diagnostic center for reading problems in adults. The diagnostic testing was combined with practical teaching techniques in

volunteer training and teacher workshops. Instruments had to be used which were not designed for adults. Consequently, professional judgment seemed more reliable than test results. It was felt that the key to sound diagnosis in the research was the observational expertise of the person conducting the testing. While four profiles of learners were discovered, and forty teaching strategies or techniques/methods were developed, these were not meant to be cast in stone, but were to be employed and used dependent on the professional judgment for the effectiveness results. The strong personal element appeared very important and necessary, despite considerable financial support to conduct pure research.

Broadwell (1987) suggests that among all the things to be considered in learning, three major basic characteristics are required in a successful learning situation. First, involvement must be meaningful and well directed. Only when the learner has said something or is doing something can the instructor be sure of the extent of involvement. Second, participant accountability for the learning activity places the responsibility for learning on them. It includes their thinking of a specific objective they must reach, not one the instructor must make them reach. Instructors will plan activities which allow and encourage the learner to take the responsibility for learning. Third, a high amount of feedback from learners allows the instructor to know just where the learner is at any given time during the instruction. Success and effectiveness will be dependent upon what instructors hear for sure and see for sure from participants to tell them what they know for sure. Thus, any techniques/methods selected and used must be employed to accomplish the three above characteristics. Broadwell did not just pick these at random out of the air, but has based his selection on his best work in forty-five countries, all forty-eight United States, fifteen years as a corporate partner, twenty years with Bell Engineering Management, and twenty-five years as an adjunct instructor in an university executive training center.

Brookfield (1990) declares that developing and growing into the private, personal truth about one's own teaching takes time and courage. He further suggests that the professional and personal judgments and insights we regard as true only become so by being tested and confirmed in our real-life work contexts. Occasionally these come by suddenly revealed reality, but more often they come incrementally and are marked by an emerging and maturing readiness to trust personal intuition even when it contradicts conventional wisdom and the pronouncements of authorities. Although effectiveness is an enormously appealing concept which he declares as irredeemably value-laden and irrevocably contextual, it is inseparably connected to participants' learning. Brookfield's truths and techniques/methods about skillful teaching which took more than twenty years for him to develop, also apply during the conduct of conference sessions. These include: being clear about the educational purpose of your conference session, reflecting on your own learning, being wary of standardized models and approaches, expecting ambiguity, remembering that perfection is impossible, researching the participants' backgrounds, attending to how participants experience learning, trusting your instincts and the participants ability as well as willingness to learn, creating diversity, taking risks, recognizing the emotionality of learning, acknowledging your personality, evaluating more than participants' satisfaction, balancing support and challenge, recognizing the significance of your actions, viewing yourself as a helper of learning, developing your own list of truths about teaching instead of trusting or adopting the above list.

Galbraith (1990,1991) provides a list which when compared with Brookfield has similarities and differences. However, he emphasizes that good facilitation has the primary purpose of assisting learners in learning-how-to-learn. It also requires the recognition that since there are no perfect facilitators nor one best way to facilitate, it requires that one think about and develop a list of principles that can serve as a guide to one's own practice of helping adults learn.

Henschke (1992) argues that theory and practice, process and content, not only need to be congruent, but also that the professional is required to be committed to this and stay the course in practice for success to be achieved. He also contends (1987, in Klevins) that continual rehearsing by the instructor for his/her own preparation is necessary for the participants to experience the learning activity as dynamic and captivating. Descriptive evidence is provided (1989,1993) from a variety of formats and contexts, when he experienced this as a participant as well as conducted sessions as a facilitator which supports the axiom that we tend to teach the way

we have been taught. These concepts and practices have been acquired and integrated during a twenty-six year period working as a student and a professional in workshops, conferences, graduate university courses, continuing education with professional groups, consultancies and internships in the USA as well as with participants from sixteen countries on five continents.

Knowles (1970,1992) asserts that he has a deep commitment to apply the principles of adult learning in everything he does. His foundational principle in making presentations is that learners be active participants in a process of inquiry, not passive receivers of transmitted content. His second principle is to build the process on the backgrounds, needs, interests, problems, and concerns of the participants. His experience over a long period of time is that when learners have opportunity to take responsibility for relating their learning to their own life situation, three things follow: They internalize more quickly, retain more permanently, and apply more confidently. And the two-fold result of learning is that learners should acquire content and enhance their self-directed learning competencies.

These principles provide the foundation of his theory of large meetings (conferences): its educative quality is directly a function of the quantity and quality of interaction in the meeting--on the platform, between the platform and the audience, as well as among members of the audience. He gives an ample variety of illustrations on using these principles in various contexts with his concluding comment that he has never had an audience fail to get turned on to the adventure of collaborative thinking.

In the practice notes of Adult Learning, focus is placed on specific techniques/methods that have proven successful and are immediately applicable to a broad range of practice. Murk (1993) describes twenty-one tested techniques for teaching adults which he has developed and used, within the last twenty years, with teachers and trainers of adults on the college/university level, in hotel/motel colleges, and in special seminar training rooms. He also invites readers to add their own. The concept of learning how to learn (Smith, 1982) has far reaching implications for adults and for those who would help adults to change and grow and take advantage of educational opportunities. Direct links to application has been made through this virtual learning encyclopedia which applies theory to adults in every educational setting one could imagine, including: Learning styles, adults as learners, self-directed and collaborative learning, alternative ways of learning, and training designs to name a few identified on an extensive list.

In dealing with literacy problems among municipal employees in New York City, Harman (1987) tells how traditional approaches to teaching reading were discarded in favor of one with the following unorthodox curriculum characteristics and teaching methods: bug and rodent extermination manuals used as instructional materials, reading exercises and group discussion were used, actual teaching performed by exterminators instead of regular teachers. Activities included small huddle groups, conversations between tutors and between a tutor and a participant, readings from the manual, discussions among members of the group, formal authoritarian teaching, preparation of individual and small-group projects on matters pertaining to extermination, and just good fun. This resulted in all the forty-two participants passing their qualifying exam and a large group asked for a continuation of the course so they could achieve higher professional levels.

When Laypoldt (1967) focused on teaching in groups, she identified and developed thirty-one points where leaders and members could and should collaborate in learning. Then she outlined, detailed and diagrammed forty different techniques for accomplishing this task. Little did she realize that many printings and twenty-six years later, this material would still be valued as effective in helping adults learn in the USA, around the world, and in the newly emerging free countries of the former East Block nations.

The ten illustrations, drawn from unusual sources, ordinarily would be considered as craft knowledge (Hays, 1993), but this author has identified as also constituting research. A number of common themes run through this research data. First, the element of active participation on the learners' part is emphasized. Second, each has been developed, experimented with, tested and

refined over a period of time. Third, success in learning results from all of them. Fourth, each professional has a unique approach fitted to his/her own person and style of practice in the learning context.

SUMMARY

This issue relates to the conference theme of linking theory and practice. The major research issue of this paper focuses on finding and/or generating evidence that determines which educational techniques/methods will produce the most effective results in conference learning. It also moves the discussion beyond "it's a good thing for adult educators to use participation techniques/methods" and presents research evidence, drawn from the untypical sources identified above, for consideration of why, how to, and results of using them in adult education conferences. Although this author asserts that in answer to the question, "What constitutes research?" The data presented does constitute research; Others, however, may still wish to develop their own answer to the question of whether this constitutes research.

A related research issue raised in this paper is to suggest going outside traditional thinking boundaries to discuss the validity of searching, not only in regular research journals, but also in the untypical places presented above, which are replete with research data that could be helpful in clarifying which conference techniques/methods may be most effective to use for purposes of helping adult conference participants learn.

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