Academic conferencing as an adult learning opportunity

by Anne Herbert

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What do people go to academic conferences for? How many times have you said or heard "The presentations weren't that good, but the networking in the breaks was worth going for"? Some people attend conferences to recruit staff; some go to test their thinking; some use a conference as an opportunity to visit some desirable but as yet unexplored exotic destination. Clearly, participants have diverse agendas. Not many of us express our agenda in terms of our intent 'to learn' something. Yet all the above agendas could be framed in terms of learning.

At some recent conferences, the organisers offered a hearty invitation to participants to articulate a driving question, and to pursue a generative dialogue of personal significance. The idea, as I understood it, was for each participant to set a personal learning goal that would in turn provide purpose and focus for all. Implicitly, this was a call for an atmosphere of inclusive democratic dialogue, and a desire for a process other than of consecutive monologic presentations followed by questions: the traditional format for academic conferences.

Not all conferences begin with a call for dialogue, enquiry and learning. Many plunge into the issues as presented by the keynote speaker. Participants are encouraged to debate, consider the research implications, and sometimes, to come up with recommendations. No doubt there are many learning opportunities here, but the tone is different.

At one recent conference I attended, participants engaged in the customary ritual of parallel sessions for three days. In the final session, there was a collective expression of discontent that there had been so many separate presentations, ostensibly on the one theme. Most of us were both participants and presenters. As presenters we felt we had not received the attention to our papers that we desired; as participants we felt we had given insufficient attention to others' papers. It was also remarked that some questions were privileged over others, and some lines of enquiry were silenced. Often a few voices had dominated, in combative debates about points of passionate interest to them. Yet in this final session, we managed to reflect, in a different tone, on the conference process and content.

That final session resulted in some suggestions about how things could be done differently. Consider: could a conference be a better learning opportunity if:

- the presenters disclosed more of their identity, such as their reasons for pursuing these questions in this way,
- each paper was available in full prior to meeting, and its conclusion highlighted the burning issues and questions the author would like discussed,
- each paper was accompanied by a poster on display at the conference site, and
- the conference began by sharing the issues and questions highlighted in the papers, with a view to fostering our thinking about the stated issues?

Questions remain about controversy and how to facilitate respectful discussion. An episode at another conference gave me a little insight into this issue. It was a seminar with a famous keynote speaker, where I was impressed by the openness of discussion, the high proportion of participants who spoke, and the inclusion of a wide variety of opinion. An organiser explained to me that conscious strategies had been employed to create this atmosphere, including:

- setting a multidisciplinary topic, and inviting stakeholders from various disciplines and from outside the academy,
- involving a team of three seminar leaders and facilitators, so their were multiple voices at the outset,
- being honest early on about the risks and failings, and
- being as non-threatening and inviting as possible in the introduction.

These are all ideas of how an academic conference can be organised as something more conducive to generative, inclusive, democratic learning. Having written this, I wonder if these are not things that many people already know: they align with many adult learning principles. But there is a difference between knowing something abstract and learning to be effective in practice.

Anne Herbert has just completed a PhD on action research at the University of South Australia, and has sent her Commentary from a conference in Canada. Your feedback is welcome at the forum at http://www.ala.asn.au/commentaries. Commentaries are written for ALA members. To receive them by email, join ALA via http://www.ala.asn.au.