

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS AND THE ART OF ASKING EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS

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Question and answer sessions in conference presentations and classrooms all too often deteriorate into the verbal equivalent of a firing squad. Few rules exist to govern audience-presenter interactions, and those that do exist are difficult to enforce. This chaos in question and answer sessions has been repeatedly observed and lamented (Wood, 2012). Boasting, verbal abuse, rambling, and self-righteous grandstanding flourish, while thoughtful questions languish. We contend that these behaviors can be reduced, and the production of constructive questions can be improved, by treating conference presentations and classrooms as forums.

The authors qualitatively analyzed their experiences attending the better part of a couple hundred conference presentations to compile a list of the kinds of questions and statements directed at presenters. Four categories emerged, personified as *The Autobiographer*, *The Heckler*, *The Rambler*, and *The Ambassador*. *The Autobiographer* is less interested in asking a question than in exploiting a captive audience. Under the guise of asking a question, he will speak at length about his own research, his analysis of the presenter's ideas, and his personal accomplishments. *The Heckler* seeks to identify any weakness in the presenter's argument, research, or speech mannerisms. Upon finding one, she will try to use it to discredit or abuse the presenter. *The Rambler* usually wants to ask a question, but has trouble distilling his ideas into a coherent thought. He will speak at length, jumping among topics, sometimes trailing off without asking anything resembling a question. *The Ambassador* takes it upon herself to be the unelected spokesperson for an entire group, to which she might or might not belong, but that she feels has been somehow wronged. Wreathed in the might of righteous indignation, she decries the presenter and his heartless ways. It is worth noting that only rarely do any of these people actually ask a question for the presenter to answer; usually they produce a statement that the presenter is expected to respond to. When they do ask a question, it often ends up being an attack phrased as a

question, along the lines of "So, when did you stop kicking puppies for sport?"

Although these four horsemen of the apocalypse are responsible for undermining most of the opportunities for constructive discourse, there is a fifth kind of audience member that contributes to the problem indirectly, through passivity. *The Ghost* sits quietly, waiting for the pain to end. These people possess the fine quality of not wanting to speak up without having something constructive to add, and typically make up the majority of any conference or classroom audience. That silence, however, gives the four horsemen the freedom to take charge.

A SOLUTION: TREAT CONFERENCES & CLASSROOMS AS FORUMS

These troublesome audience members are not entirely at fault for their behavior, and they are certainly not bad people. In the absence of suitable guidance, those behaviors are natural, or at least commonplace. We have all probably channeled one or more of the horsemen at some point in our lives. The solution, then, is to create an environment in which the better angels of our nature flourish. Conference presentations and college classrooms are, at their core, forums. Forums exist to promote the exchange of ideas, and they operate by rules that can, and ought to be, applied to conference presentations and college classrooms. While forums come in a variety of types, for the purposes of this article we will be looking at structure and shared purpose, which are what makes forums effective, no matter their type.

What to do as a Presenter

Two elements are needed for a successful forum: An itinerary, governing what the presenter will do, and guidelines, laying out what is expected of the audience. The itinerary

indicates how long the presentation will last, and might possibly disclose its outline. This transparency removes audience uncertainty over what the topics the presentation will canvas, and reduces the urge for attendees to interrupt the speaker, or pay more attention to the structure of the presentation than to the content. Guidelines for audience expectations should establish when and how the audience will be invited to interact with the presenter. An especially comprehensive approach would encourage the audience to take notes, in order to promote mental engagement and create a more accurate record of the presentation than memory alone permits (Adler, 1983, p. 106). Both the itinerary and audience expectations should be made available in writing, preferably in advance, as well as verbally, at the beginning of the presentation or whenever a reminder might be helpful.

Guidance alone, however, is not sufficient for creating a successful forum. The audience and presenter should share a sense of common purpose, a feeling that they have gathered together for the same reason. In the absence of this emotional bond, we've regretfully observed that feelings of hostility often dominate. Audience hostility makes presenters defensive, and even worse, shuts down productive communication. The best questions and the best answers come about if the audience and the presenter trust one another and capitalize on the forum as a learning opportunity. To create a sense of shared purpose at the beginning of a presentation, it can be useful to take a moment to remind the audience that they have gathered together out of curiosity in the subject matter and the desire to learn from and share with one another.

What to do as an Audience Member

As audience members, we are limited in our options for improving question and answer sessions. When the opportunity to ask questions begins, the most valuable action an audience member can take is to be the first to speak, and to ask a constructive question. A good opening question can set the tone for future questions. Most importantly, though, both the question and its response take time away from the horsemen.

As audience members, the other thing we can do is to improve how we react to the presenter. Not everyone is an excellent public speaker, but public speaking skills are no prerequisite for possessing ideas worth sharing. Nervous behaviors and use of filler words such as "um" or "uh" can be distracting but need to be overlooked. Another source of distraction, as Mortimer Adler points out, is that many of us have a tendency to overreact when a speaker brings up ideas we strongly disagree with. By setting aside negative emotional responses, we can avoid prejudging what the speaker might be saying (Adler, 1983, p. 89). By doing these things and maintaining our desire to learn throughout the presentation, we stand the best chance of understanding what the speaker is trying to say, and are much more likely to produce constructive questions.

THREE MOST USEFUL KINDS OF CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONS FOR CONFERENCES

We submit that there are three main types of constructive questions that make the best use of the limited time for question and answer sessions: factual questions, clarifying questions, and exploratory questions.

Factual questions ask for specific, concrete information. The purpose of these questions is to supply additional information of interest to the questioner. Factual questions can often be answered quickly, in a sentence or two. The information being requested should be of such a nature that it is reasonable and likely that the presenter will know it from memory; otherwise the question becomes hostile in nature and ceases to be constructive.

- What software did you use to create the video you used in your presentation?
- Which author did you find most useful for your research?
- What is the size of the institution where you conducted your study?

Clarifying questions exist to determine whether or not the questioner properly understood one of the presenter's points. They seek yes or no responses, and typically feature a paraphrase of the point in question. By restating a potentially contentious point and asking the presenter to agree or disagree (or provide a clarification), serious arguments can be avoided. For this type of question to work best, it is important for the questioner to assume potential disagreements are likely the result of a misunderstanding, and to provide the speaker with an opportunity to resolve that misunderstanding. It is also important to note that, for this type of question, tone is a crucial component for maintaining civility.

- Are you suggesting that we shouldn't publicly bring up disagreements in question and answer sessions?
- Would you say that you are in favor of policy X?
- Do you think taking notes is necessary for asking good questions?

Exploratory questions require thought, creativity, and more lengthy responses from presenters. They are the meat of the question and answer session, and the main reason why these sessions are worth participating in. These questions ask presenters to apply their ideas in a new context, or to speculate about far-reaching implications.

- How would you apply these ideas about questions to the context of a professional meeting?
- Could you tell us how you prefer to bring people together with a shared sense of purpose?

- What do you think about recording and assessing student questions to get a better understanding of their mastery of the material?

One Last Kind of Question: Challenges

Challenging questions attack the accuracy or validity of the presenter's reasoning or evidence. Due to being explicitly confrontational, it is especially important to prepare and ask them well. The purpose of a challenging question isn't to invalidate the presenter's ideas; it is to alleviate your objection, or to help identify a gap in reasoning or evidence, so that it may be fixed. Whether the presenter addresses your objection or admits a gap is irrelevant: either outcome is positive. Either the ideas stand up to critique, or the presenter walks away having learned about a weak spot in the argument. Mortimer Adler considered these exchanges among the most valuable; once his ideas ceased to garner challenges, he estimated them ready for publication (Adler, 1983, p. 118-119). Challenges are different from clarifying questions in that the clarifying questions ask for a yes or no; challenges ask for a more substantive reply, often a defense or explanation.

- If active learning is the ideal teaching method, how do you explain why students have trouble in classes such as chemistry, which extensively uses active learning?
- Could you provide an example of setting expectations for your audience, as a presenter, while maintaining the free academic exchange of ideas?
- How do these types of questions apply to both conferences and classrooms, since they are different learning environments?

TEN SUGGESTIONS FOR ASKING QUESTIONS IN DISORGANIZED FORUMS

10. Your opinion doesn't matter.

Neither positive nor negative sentiment has any place being expressed during a question and answer session. Praise rarely yields an interesting response and emotionally charged criticism can make others shut down. What is needed are questions, and the best questions stem from genuine curiosity in the subject matter.

9. Use simple language.

Question and answer sessions often take place in large rooms with poor acoustics. Small words and straightforward sentences are easier to speak with volume and clarity.

8. Keep it brief.

You are most likely to get a useful answer out of a presenter if your question can be readily understood. Short questions are easier for the presenter to parse, and easier to respond to.

7. Disagree later.

This does not mean that your opinions are not valid. Disagreements have a time and a place but conference Q&A's might not be either. Instead, wait to talk to the presenter(s) one-on-one after the session has concluded.

6. Limit yourself to one question.

It is easy to get caught up in the moment and want to ask a follow up question. Remember, however, that others are also passionate about the topic, and time is usually limited.

5. Don't trap the squirrels.

Sometimes, presenters dodge questions. If you catch one doing this, it is best to assume the presenter has a good reason. Perhaps the reply would be too lengthy or complex for the allotted time. Perhaps the presenter is concerned the audience might dislike the reply. Perhaps the presenter is at a loss, but doesn't want to admit ignorance. Regardless, nothing constructive is gained by pointing this out.

4. Omit paraphernalia.

A constructive question does not require explanation before it can be asked. Padding a question with references to the presentation or to information from your own memory takes time from everyone else.

3. Begin your question with an interrogative, if at all possible.

Who, what, where, why, and when are the questioner's best friends. Beginning a question with an interrogative helps to clarify that question's purpose.

2. Don't use questions as weapons.

Questions should be designed to promote learning. If your question has the potential to demean or embarrass, it ought to be revised or not asked.

1. Tone accounts for a lot.

A defensive presenter is seldom a creative presenter. Question and answer sessions can be stressful for many presenters. There is always the concern that a hostile audience member might launch an attack. To get the best reply out of a presenter, be careful to modulate your tone to dismiss any concerns that you might turn out to be that dreaded hostile audience member.

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