Symposia, Colloquia, and Workshops

21

Abstract

Symposia/colloquia, discussions, presentations, and workshops are all very distinct entities. Yet at many international conferences I attended the internal structure of symposia presentations and parallel session/free paper presentations was conflated—and might be described as a series of connected presentation sessions sharing a common theme. So then, how can we best understand the basic differences between these various speech events? This chapter aims to answer that question, offer some suggestions on preferred forms and moves frequently noted in such events, and, in particular, provide advice about managing workshops.

21.1 Symposia/Colloquia

Both symposia/colloquia and workshops are expected to be more interactive than standard CPs, which implies greater prevalence of what I will refer to as a more horizontal dialogue rather than the vertical dimension of rank-and-file FP/PSs. What do I mean by this? A symposium implies a dynamic discussion of some sort, often between peers selected to be on a panel. This discussion could be a type of debate or an open discussion following the 'presentation' portion of the symposium. The central point is that in symposia/colloquia, the speakers have a chance to address each other, as well as have the audience address them, regarding the issues at hand (Fig. 21.1).

In my observations, symposium speeches were generally not used as opportunities for the speakers to introduce their research (as is the case in a standard CP) but used rather to erect a rhetorical platform that enabled further discussion on a set
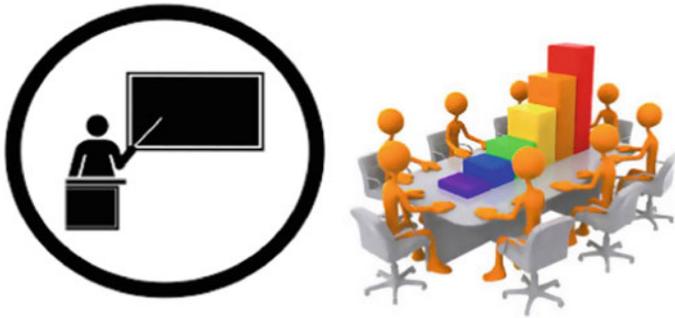
Fig. 21.1 The physical environments of presentations and workshops are distinct—and thus lend themselves toward different communicative goals and modes of interaction

theme (what might be best described as a 'position' paper). This implies that the symposia speeches should be topically balanced and sequenced, not delivered as independent unconnected presentations. It is expected that there will be some flow, cohesion, and continuity between the presentations, with the participants usually conferring well in advance to make certain that all participants are on-topic, do not repeat or cover the same ground, and are sequenced in such a way that best addresses the pertinence of the issue or topic.

21.2 Effective Workshop Leadership Practices

Table 21.1 displays a list of what I will call 'good practices' for workshop leaders based on my own experiences as a leader, as well as the cobbling together of effective practices noted at numerous workshops attended over my 30 years' experience of teaching, teacher training, and participating in seminars and workshops. I have included this outline because, while specially invited independent seminars tend to be conducted by acknowledged experts in the specific topic/skill area who also have developed workshop leadership skills, steering committee vetted workshops held at conferences are not always led by skilled, veteran workshop managers and are occasionally conducted instead by young or novice academics/professionals (Fig. 21.2).

Recently, there has been a notable increase in the number of workshops and seminars that conclude with an open discussion, not those of the typical CP Q&A variety, but more of a roundtable in which participants are typically seated in a circle or semicircle. While this may, on the one hand, indicate an attempt to democratize the event, such environments can also be uncomfortable for

Table 21.1 Twenty hints for leading an effective conference workshop or discussion

Twenty good practices for workshop leaders
1. Choose a topic or skill that you have researched or hold expertise in such that you will be able to convey something new and of value to participants—with authority.
2. Remember the basic goal: to make others more interested in and/or knowledgeable about the topic or skill.
3. Do not hand out a paper/summary at the beginning unless your workshop requires the participants to follow active instructions (otherwise, many participants will just read the handout and ignore what you say). Distribute any such papers in the middle or at the end of the session.
4. Choose only a few central teaching/learning points, something participants are unlikely to already know and will be likely to retain.
5. Try to find out the participants' familiarity and knowledge of the topic, or skill level, at the beginning of the workshop (or even in advance, if possible).
6. Try to create a personal atmosphere. Move among participants (note that participants are not an 'audience' when at a workshop), shift speaking areas, use names, and use more direct questions/comments than you would in a seminar or presentation.
7. Think very closely about how to open the session—do not start your topic directly with 'Today's workshop is about…' (as per advice given earlier regarding CPs).
8. Think how to clearly and effectively close the session. Do not suddenly end with, 'That's all' or 'We're finished.'
9. Give participants time to respond (and encourage responses that are more than just one word). Respond in turn to participants. Create multi-directional dialogues.
10. Elicit content from participants (after which the workshop leader can add or modify as necessary). Do not just tell.
11. Try to include every participant at some point in discussion, demonstration, or practice.
12. Teach/introduce only a few, new, key specialist vocabulary items when necessary. For prioritizing new or specialist vocabulary, consider whether these have long-term (intrinsic) or short-term (instrumental) value.
13. Try to use realia or physical props if possible—make your workshop as visual or tactile as you can.
14. Consider including a short quiz, summative task, and/or elicit a summary of key points from participants at or near the end.
15. Do not talk for too long. Allow members to participate, speak, or carry out an activity.
16. Do not read from a script or paper for more than 15 s or about 30 words.
17. Use a white board or tablet if necessary, rather than the full overhead screen.
18. If you use a paper handout, bullet or point form is more effective than paragraph form. Use carefully constructed visual cues on any such materials.
19. Try to anticipate the areas in which difficulties, disagreements, questions, or misunderstandings are most likely to occur and be prepared to address them.
20. Allow time for questions, feedback, and/or comments at the end (if not during the session)

Fig. 21.2 Students can lead small-scale academic workshops as a part of their professional training

participants who prefer not to be asked questions or forced to comment. Workshop or discussion leaders might want to take this into consideration based on the makeup of the participants. Another factor in making these types of discussions successful will be the number of participants—more than a half dozen, and it is highly unlikely that the desired equal opportunity for sharing viewpoints will occur.

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 21

1. Why is it not a good idea to distribute a copy of slides or content in advance of a workshop? On what occasions might it be justified?
2. If you were conducting a workshop, how might you (a) measure, and (b) elicit participant knowledge and experience of the topic?
3. Explain one way in which the discourse of symposia/colloquia is different from each of (a) standard CPs and (b) workshops.