

## OTHER THINGS EQUAL

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### How to Organize a Conference

Economists and other talkers live for conferences. Teaching is OK, colleagues are swell, reading is nice, consulting is fun. But flying across the country in mid-winter to sit in a quarter-full hotel ballroom listening to someone exceeding their allotted time — that's what the intellectual life of an economist is all about. I've been to a passel of conferences, man and boy, some half dozen a year. During 25 years that comes to about 150 in sum. Hog heaven.

Being public spirited and impulsive, I've organized quite a few conferences, too, about 25. There's a career path in such things. The first I organized was in 1970, as an assistant professor. I (really, my wife and I) did everything, getting the money, drawing up the invitations, hassling the paper-givers, and driving down Mass Avenue before each day of the conference to get the donuts. I then edited the conference volume, down to transcribing the recorded discussion into indirect discourse (look it up: "Professor Landes then said such and such"). Everyone should have this experience, the whole nine yards, at least once. It's like finding out where the data come from. After doing it once you move on to less intense experiences. For example, lately I helped Victor Fuchs organize part of the AEA conference for January 1995. I did nothing but read some proposals with care and then call around to see who could be roped into doing the actual work. Still, I suppose it counts as "organizing" a conference, and I've done on two occasions that harder job that Victor had. No one who has not organized a large association's conference knows what administrative hell is like. I lost the second best secretary I've had shortly after she had gone through the experience twice.

So I have some claim as consumer and producer to knowing how to organize a conference, at any rate if the 25 I've organized were not a succession of bombs. There were a couple like that, but most were all right and some — such as the 1984 conference I helped organize at Iowa that launched what we call "the rhetoric of inquiry," and one of the annual "Cliometrics" conferences — have been what intellectual life should be: in the words of the English political philosopher Michael Oakeshott, "unrehearsed intellectual adventure." And I've organized or attended enough Conferences From Hell to have observed a wide range in the dependent variable.

Here are a few suggestions from the data. I think of a new one every time I go to a conference, so I confine myself here to the more important ones.

1. Distribute the papers to the audience in advance. You want to maximize the time for discussion, not the time for exposition best left to the printed page. In the humanities and even in economics in some countries the presenter is expected literally to read her paper word-for-word, and in such fields the best people get to be pretty good at it. But it does not suit the genius of American economics. In American economics, and in math, physics, and biology, the format is called, revealingly, "the talk." Talk, not read.
2. But then keep the talk to a minimum in order to give the maximum time for discussion — more talk, the best kind, in actual dialogue. The author can present a few further thoughts, five minutes max, and then open the floor. If the paper is distributed in advance then the author has no excuse to filibuster. (A famous economist I know is notorious for sending a paper, which is reproduced and distributed, but then showing up at the conference with his own stack of a heavily revised version that puts him back in the driver's seat; his friends are not sure whether this is conscious gaming or just a desire to excel gone a little wacko; probably the latter).
3. In order for all this to work you as the organizer have to, first, make sure the papers are in by canceling the author's participation if he does not send it on time, and second, resist all suggestions that because "some of the audience may not have read the paper" the author should be allowed to babble on for 60 minutes. It turns out that it's not essential to have read the paper to participate at some level in the discussion, because the issues raised, if the paper is interesting at all, will be of a general character. Of course, to participate at a serious professional level one must have read the paper. But the non-readers are not being cut out entirely, and the quality of the discussion is much higher if some people have read the paper with care. You must tell all participants about these rules in advance, but if you do, and can affect a suitably grim demeanor, you will provide them with the optimal incentives.
4. "Workshop" each paper by itself. That is, let Ms. Jones talk a little about her paper, then open the floor to discussion of her paper. Then let Mr. Smith talk about his paper, with discussion from the floor. Then do the same with paper number three, and so forth. The intellectual drama in a conference always comes from the discussion (and rarely from a discussion prepared in advance, unless you have chosen the speaker's worst enemy as discussant). It is torture to the audience to sit through three twenty-minute presentations by A, B, C (who of course run over their time), then to hear three tediously predictable "discussions" from D, E, and F, and then, ten minutes before lunch, finally get to the adventure. It is hard to persuade people of the merits of workshopping until they try it. Often they will make the argument in the abstract that such workshopping is "unfair to the last speaker," by which they mean that everyone will poach on the last speaker's time, since he's last. The argument is only welfare relevant if the audience is for some reason regarded as the least important part of the proceedings, and should get last dibs, the

better to be "fair" to one of three or four people who have talked longer than they were supposed to. Even with such a strange welfare function, it is only relevant in a second-best world in which the chair has not enforced the clock — and if that's the case the last paper-giver is going to get shortchanged anyway. So it's Pareto optimal to workshop papers at every conference. If the chair does her job the 90 minutes (say) are split into three strictly-enforced subsessions of 30 minutes each, so that every paper gets its fair amount of presentation and discussion. Fairness is maintained and audience boredom is relieved. The economics of "we'll just follow the printed schedule" is defective. The speaker gains from having her paper discussed — if she doesn't think so, she can in any case filibuster and absorb all the 30 minutes in presentation. The economics is that establishing private property in each subsession — by workshopping — eliminates the incentive under the usual procedure for Speaker One to poach on the common pool.

5. For the same reason, and using the same economics (left as an exercise to the reader), start exactly on time, regardless of whether all the speakers are there.

And a few rules of politeness, that turn out to have intellectual consequences:

6. You can tell people how to behave at the conference, and on the whole they will do what you say. I learned this from the Liberty Fund, which holds superb, small conferences about which the Fund has strict rules: participants must turn in their papers on time, or they are canceled; they must attend all the sessions, or they do not get their pay; they must attend all meals. The public or private instructions you give will work. For instance, you can tell the senior people in confidence to be gentle on the graduate students and they will — contrary to one of the bomb conferences I attended, in which a senior professor, in order to get at another senior professor supervising a graduate student, attacked the graduate student's paper as "a term paper, not a professional paper." Nice guy. (Incidentally, the remark was incorrect, and the graduate student has gone on to a distinguished career.)
7. Never leave people alone for meals, most particularly people you have specially invited. It is boorish, and makes the specially invited speaker feel like a sucker: "For this treatment I left the bosom of my family and flew 1000 miles?" In any case the best talk usually happens at meals and you don't want to miss it.
8. For that reason meals are a good investment. By spending not much money per person, which in a pinch you can even extract from them, you can arrange for people to break bread and do more of the unrehearsed intellectual adventure. By the way, crowded places are not good places to do it: the ideal common meal is at a deserted college dining room out of term, the more spartan the better. A monkish atmosphere seems to encourage serious conversation.

There are other rules, as I say. Get an assistant who is more intelligent, polite, firm, organized, and sensible than you are. Be warmly polite to people whose papers you reject. Consider poster sessions of the sort they run in the biological sciences, but then make a big deal of them, allotting a couple of hours in which the entire conference is expected to attend. Announce rigid deadlines for proposals, but then do not be stupid about rejecting a superb paper just because it was a couple of days late. Have as much socializing as possible, preferably socializing that throws together people unacquainted with each other. Do the socializing early in the conference, not late: you want people to get over the pomposity and aggression as early as possible, and start having their intellectual adventure. Allow plenty of time for out-of-session schmoozing: if you don't, no one will attend your sessions. Prefer "plenary" (i.e. whole group) sessions to parallel sessions: you're trying to start a conversation. Don't let the hotel get away with its Standard Business Conference Procedures: bother them. Try the NBER format of having the commentator present (briefly) the paper. Try not having any commentators at all: it makes the audience act less like free riders. Do not be surprised or even annoyed if VIPs back out: at least they've let you use their name to gather the group for the adventure. Ask VIPs at least a year in advance. More like two years in advance: the world gets nuttier by the minute. On the other hand, watch out for VIPs: they often do not do their homework (the dog ate it) and they sometimes expect prima donna treatment in a world in which most of us are seconde donne. And so forth. It's a little piece of academic business that we should learn how to do better, and can.

*Other Things Equal*, a column by Donald N. McCloskey, appears regularly in this *Journal*.