

Making AOM Sessions Exciting!

A Workshop

The attached report emerged from a professional development workshop run at the 1999 Academy of Management meetings (August 8, 1999, Chicago, IL).

Purpose: There is a growing concern that the quality of AoM sessions is unbalanced. While some sessions are interesting, others fail because 1) presenters cannot convey key points, 2) discussants don't offer insightful comments, and/or 3) the audience is not engaged. While the field has evolved dramatically and the Academy has grown considerably, presentations at the annual conference have changed little. This pre-conference workshop explored ways of improving sessions so that our members find them interesting, informative, and stimulating. Our focus was on presenters, discussants, and the structure of sessions.

Participants: The panel and audience provided quite a number of suggestions that are listed on the pages that follow. The panel included:

- Sally Blount-Lyon (University of Chicago)
- Michael H. Lubatkin (University of Connecticut and E.M. Lyon)
- Karl Weick (University of Michigan)
- Edward J. Zajac (Northwestern University)
- Co Chairs: Russ Coff (Emory University) and Jing Zhou (Texas A&M)

Overview of key roles: The following are brief descriptions of the key roles in Academy sessions. The rest of this document expands on these and provides specific ideas and suggestions for participants.

- *Presenter:* The presenter's job is to sell the paper and convince the audience that it is worth reading. This requires emphasis of the contribution rather than a summary of all sections of the paper.
- *Discussant:* Discussants should view their role as tying the papers together and engaging the audience in the session. It is not to do a *stand-up* critique of each paper individually.
- *Session Chair:* Chairs must balance the needs of presenters (wishing time to get their ideas across) and the audience to design and execute an interesting session. This goes well beyond being a mere timekeeper.

Next Steps: While the suggestions herein are innovative and interesting, many of the ideas are not new, per se. The key question is how to diffuse the ideas among the academy. The following implementation suggestions emerged in the session to address this:

- *Socialization of doctoral students.* Include information on presentations and the other roles as a part of doctoral and new faculty consortia. These people typically cannot attend PDWs due to time conflicts.
- *Role Descriptions to Participants.* Provide better role descriptions when participants are invited to present or serve as chairs or discussants.
- *Program Chairs.* Provide suggestions to program chairs as a basis for broader implementation.
- *Web.* Post suggestions for roles on the web along with the program itself in coming years.

The Role of the Presenter

Many AOM presentations are unsuccessful in that the audience is not motivated to read the full paper. The following are some ideas for how authors can get the audience engaged and excited about the paper. Most practices in the “DON’T” column are standard procedure and the suggestions may seem radical. However, the object should be a presentation that *covers less* but makes a compelling argument that the paper *should be read*.

Description	DON’T	DO
Purpose of presentation	Present summaries of all sections of the paper	Present enough to tell the audience that the paper is worth a read – tell a good story. Focus on the contribution. Minimize discussion of sections that don’t stress what is new & different.
Presentation format & timing	Save the punchline as a sort of <i>surprise</i> ending Plan for 20 minutes in case there is extra time. Use small fonts or too many overheads	Consider starting with the conclusion and then explain why you reached it (e.g. methods/results). Provide a 1 page handout describing your contribution & key points. Plan for 10 minutes – it is easier to elaborate than to cut things out. Use fonts larger than 28 pt & no more than 10 overheads.
Audience Interaction:	Give a monologue describing your research	Create expectations that you expect active audience participation. Survey/work the audience before the session starts. Look people in the eye and talk to them (not at them). Identify places for audience input and ask questions. Consider using brief exercises or scenarios that draw on the audience’s personal experiences/knowledge. Offer an interactive data analysis (“mess with the data”) by inviting the audience to make assumptions & suggest relationships to test.
Introduction	Focus on why you decided to do the study. Be too conceptual	Do focus on what is interesting and new about what you have learned Do try to start off with a real-world analogy/story
Theory:	Present a broad literature review (cites, etc.) Explain every arrow in a complex figure	State the problem, why it is interesting, and what you will add. Explain what is new in this model over past contributions.
Methods:	Describe the sample measures, and validation of instruments	Provide an overview of why the measures are linked to the theoretical construct. Establish face validity and assure that more rigorous methods were applied.
Results:	Present any tables with numbers	Present what was significant (+ and – signs). Explain what the data tell you – not tests. People can read the paper to get details.
Conclusion:	Review each result and summarize what was significant.	Answer broadly what we have learned and what needs to be done now. Urge the audience to read the paper for details.

These guidelines are not intended to be rigid – some papers contribute through literature reviews or methods, etc. The main point is to sell rather than summarize. Again, the objective is to get the audience to read the paper – not to present so much detail that one has no reason to read it.

The Role of the Discussant¹

Broadly, discussants should integrate the ideas and, at the same time, encourage audience interaction:

- DON'T do a standard stand-up 'reviewer' routine for each paper one at a time.
- Try to identify shared constructs, linked findings, and contradictory results that emerge across papers
- Try to identify on-going debates, themes, puzzles within the topic domain and how the group of papers contributes to them.
- What future directions are suggested by the group of papers – are there any holes?
- Turn the task on the audience and facilitate a discussion on how to integrate or take the next steps.

Realistic job preview of discussant role

1. You'll get none of the papers in advance.
2. At the session there will be no time left for you to make your comments.
3. If there is time left, you'll be introduced as the person who will pull all of this together.
4. The audience wants you to sit down so they can ask their questions.
5. It's fun to do because you have a chance to spot connections and you don't have to scramble to write a quasi-paper during the December holidays to get a slot at the annual meeting.

The psychology of a symposium

1. Participants want to publicize and call attention to an emerging body of neat stuff. Or they may want to talk to see if among them they may have stumbled onto some neat stuff. Or they want to clear the air on a contentious issue. Symposium is like a special issue of a journal.
2. Part of audience has come to see what speakers look like, some want to learn what all the fuss is about, some should be on the panel rather than in the audience, some have come to give moral support, some want to meet speaker afterward, and some are just tapped out on the convention and want a place to rest.
3. Safest assumption is that participants are thinking what they want to say and are not listening to others, at least not until they give their talk. Thus, the 1st speaker will have heard more of what is said than the 2nd, etc. The first speaker often has been at a different symposium than the last speaker. First speaker is more of an ally for discussant. Because participants are preoccupied with talking rather than listening, they will not have picked up on many connections between the papers. When the discussant mentions some obvious ones, that will usually be the first time the participants have thought of them.
4. Also, because listening may be very uneven, it is a huge help if discussant says what the core idea is in each paper. This is tough and risky. Many papers were written in haste and don't have a core idea (possible remark: "this overview touched on several timely issues but I want to discuss just one.")
5. Participants and the audience as well want the discussant to give a context that makes sense of the papers, be enthusiastic about the work, and improve it by extending it and by making constructive replacements of poorer methods and arguments with better ones. Chances are you weren't their first choice as a discussant. Being a discussant is like being a book reviewer; it's an acquired taste and not a lot of people are eager to do it.

Building the commentary itself

1. Start a folder on the topic right away.
2. Act as if the proposal is all you'll know. Given that title, what might she say? That prediction will be an anchor for you to listen to what they do say.
3. Read their stuff multiple times. Each time you'll see something different because you will have had different intervening experiences and you are a different reader.
4. Have definitions of key terms. Authors may not do this. You can always say, these people are not talking about this phenomenon as it is usually defined. It is usually defined as X. They ignore x_1 , and they add x_{1+n} . Does that help them or not?

¹The majority of this section was taken from the handout written and distributed by Karl Weick

5. Sample leads
 - a. Do you realize who's in trouble if these people are right?
 - b. You can do even more with this argument than what we've heard here. For instance,...
 - c. Notice what these panelists didn't say. They could have asserted that X. They didn't. Why not?
 - d. The predominant citation in these papers is X. What if it had been Y?
 - e. We came to this symposium with assumptions that act as filters to determine our reactions to what we hear. There are at least four reactions people can have: That's absurd (deny assumption), that's interesting (disconfirm weak assumption), that's obvious (affirms assumptions), that's irrelevant (do not speak to assumptions). What is the pattern of reactions to what we have heard?
 - f. Given this topic, I expected these people to say X. Much to my surprise they said Y. What can we make of that?
6. Give each panelist a copy of your remarks. You've thought about their work more than most people. Leave your observations with them so that they can think about them in quieter times.

How to cope when you didn't get the papers in advance

1. Take notes on 2-column paper so you can write comments in left-hand column. "Remember when she said X. There is a body of data that are inconsistent with that."
2. Write key phrases on post-its so can arrange sequence.
3. To get your bearings. Why did she title the paper this way? Is there a better title? Is this the correct sequence for these papers?
4. Draw audience in: "before we get to your questions, let me ask you in the audience to take on the role of discussant for the moment. What do you think are the big ideas we heard, what surprised you, what's controversial, what will you take away, what symposium should we propose next year?"
5. Skim a recent newspaper prior to session. Something in it will have been relevant to the topic. "There is a certain timeliness to these presentations, at least judging from this item in today's NYT."

Possible Questions

1. Should your discussion focus on individual papers and comment on each paper?

Ans: You probably will do this because it's an obvious way to organize the discussion. I usually do this because I like to point out really neat stuff that may have gone unnoticed. Also sometimes, due to time pressure, authors leave out good stuff. I like to use some of my time to put that material on the table. But, if you do go paper by paper, each author expects equal time and if you don't give equal time that feels evaluative (less discussion implies a poorer paper). What is really troublesome is that some papers, often good ones, are self-contained and there just isn't much to say about them. So the implied evaluation is precisely the opposite of the actual evaluation.
2. How to get audience involved?

Ans: That's a non-starter for me. I don't worry about that. They'll wade in when given a chance.
3. Isn't being a discussant just the same as being a manuscript reviewer?

Ans: Probably, but it shouldn't be. In symposium author has a chance to correct misperceptions of discussant right away. Mindset of discussant is not, show me why this is a major contribution to the literature. Mindset is, you wouldn't have put all this work into this topic unless you thought there was something important to be said. Lets be sure we talk about what that important thing is.
4. How do you make AoM sessions exciting?

Ans: My definition of "exciting" is a session in which motivated people prepare, do their homework, make a coherent argument within their allotted time, and have something interesting to say. For me that's "exciting", in part because it is so rare. Here are particulars of how you make sessions exciting: 1) By people preparing for them rather than blowing them off. 2) By being engaged with the topic. 3) By having handouts so people can follow you, take notes, and follow-up. 4) By pointing out implications for teaching that people can put into use in a month when school starts. 5) By being enthusiastic about your topic. 6) By not taking yourself too seriously. 7) By staying within your time limits and organizing the presentation so that it coheres within those time constraints. 8) By having examples. 9) By knowing when you have an argument that needs to be studied closely, and keeping it out of an AoM session. 10) By reading your paper out loud before the session and smoothing out places where you stumble while speaking or where you run out of breath. 11) By telling people upfront, early why this IS an exciting session (turn the self-fulfilling prophecy to your advantage).

The Role of the Session Chair

Chairs are not just timekeepers. How can they organize and facilitate sessions to bring out audience participation?

In Preparation for the Session

- Create expectations for how the session will be run. Don't try to establish these in the session once authors have developed their presentations.
- Make sure everyone gets copies of the papers (authors should also get copies of other papers if possible to promote a panel discussion).
- Get slides from the presenters and serve as a mentor to inexperienced authors. This is an opportunity to alert the author that the presentation is too long before he/she is in front of an audience.
- Work with discussants to set up debates, themes, puzzles -- that could be addressed and carried through the session.
- Discuss innovations in session structure and time usage with presenters well in advance. Here are a few variations on the usual theme:
 - *Shuffle presenters.* This involves asking presenters to make brief presentations about other papers on the panel. The idea is to spur discussion within the panel by forcing them to become experts on the other papers.
 - *Small Group Breakout:* 1) Each presenter gives a 3 minute overview of their paper (15 minutes) 2) authors run discussion groups on their papers (40 minutes), 3) large group reconvenes to bring it together (20 minutes).
 - *Poster Breakout.* Have presenters prepare poster presentations around the room. 1) presenters give a brief overview (10 minutes), 2) individuals walk around the room talking to authors (40 minutes), 3) group comes together to discuss (20 minutes)
 - *Discussant overview.* Have the discussant start with an overview and introduction to the papers
 - *Web-based discussion of papers before the meetings.* It might be possible to set up a bulletin board or discussion list around sessions before the meetings. This capability might be integrated with a web-based personal scheduling function offered by the Academy.

During the Session

- DON'T give the standard boiler-plate about time, and take up too much time doing it. Tell the presenters the "rules" before the session.
- DO start out with a few words about the subject matter of the session and how each paper will contribute toward exploring that research domain.
- Session chairs must shut down inexperienced or unprepared presenters who do not conform to the prescribed time limits.
- Create an informal "first-name" atmosphere in the session to encourage discussion.
- *Power Dilemma:* Often session chairs are relatively inexperienced. There may be significant power/status differences between the chair and the authors. This makes enforcement difficult and may make it hard to implement innovations as well.