

Hints for successful panel presentations

Preparing for ACRL's 11th National Conference

by Damon D. Hickey



Ed. note: This is the first in a series of articles about ways to plan a successful conference program at ACRL's 11th National Conference, "Learning to Make a Difference," to be held in Charlotte, April 10-13, 2003.

An underlying emphasis of the forthcoming conference is the active engagement of the participants. As co-chair of the subcommittee for panel sessions, I have been reflecting on those elements of a panel presentation that encourage active engagement of the audience. While there are other models that potential presenters may consider, I am sharing in this article one particular model that I have found especially useful.

One of my favorite television programs is *The NewsHour with Jim Lebrer*, formerly *The McNeil-Lebrer Report*. The program has been criticized because it features mainly "talking heads." But to me the *NewsHour* "conversations" are still a lot more interesting than most conference panel sessions, where a series of people seated on a dais read prepared statements and then respond at length to audience questions.

A *NewsHour* report may begin with a videotaped set-up piece, in which a reporter

presents the issues, introduces the story, and provides factual information (usually dubbed-over video footage and graphics), followed by clips of interviews with experts, who often present differing views. Then the reporter appears live in the newsroom with several guests chosen for their varied perspectives and opinions. The reporter introduces them and asks them questions individually to elicit their views. The reporter knows ahead of time what ground he or she wants to cover, and insists that the panelists stay with issue x before tackling issue y. But the reporter also has to be able to improvise, so that if one person makes a strong statement, the reporter can pick it up as a segue into a question to the next guest, and so on.

The reporter also needs to know the subject well and to know when to interrupt for a clarification or to get someone back on track. The result is a conversation in which the television audience is invited to participate vicariously, and sometimes virtually, through program-related Web-based discussions.

I tried to adapt this shared conversation model for one ALA panel session that I moderated, and it worked so well that I've continued to use it for others. First, I find a group of panelists who have varied and even conflicting perspectives on an issue. I ask them to tell me what they think are the most important questions about the issue. I add to

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Call for Participation

ACRL seeks the best ideas of our profession and invites proposal submissions on a variety of topics facing academic and research librarians. Program session formats include: contributed papers, panel sessions, preconferences, workshops, poster sessions, and roundtables. The Call for Participation for the Charlotte conference is online at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/charlotte/cfp.html>. Proposals for panel sessions are due May 31, 2002.

their questions others of my own, and share them as questions that we *may* ask them. That gives them a mental head start, but I request that they not prepare detailed answers in advance or not write down what they plan to say, in order to preserve spontaneity. I also tell them that I may not ask them all of these questions, and may think of new ones as the program proceeds.

I've tried to arrange tables on the dais so that I'm in the middle and the panelists fan out on either side of me. We usually end up with the tables arranged in a large "U" or "V," with the moderator at the bottom, the panelists on either side, and the audience at the top. It's important to have enough microphones so that panelists can respond easily to a statement or question. At some point I invite members of the audience to step to the microphone with comments and questions of their own, to which one or more of the panelists may respond. At the end I thank each panelist by name for participating and thank the audience for coming.

What's missing from this model is the short *NewsHour* set-up piece. I've actually seen

pretty effective videotaped pieces, including interviews, at the start of some ALA programs. I'd recommend using one at the beginning of a panel discussion if and only if it were planned carefully and done well.

Panels that have been done this way have consistently received positive evaluations. Some of these sessions have been two hours long with audiences of more than two hundred. My experience has been that very few attendees have left these sessions early. ■

(*The LEAPing . . .* cont. from page 26)

library's student computing labs, dorm rooms, or at home. The library benefits by being able to test and improve this service with feedback provided by LEAP students and faculty.

Another librarian points out "that we used LEAP students for some very useful focus groups. They were by far the most successful attempts to get undergraduates in, and the students had enough to exposure to the library that they were able to make a number of astute observations. Two things stand out in my mind from the focus groups and general observation through the years of LEAP students: we who work here forget how big and complex this place is. The physical environment/how things work parts of the library experience are extremely important to students. Feedback from the focus groups has made a documented difference in library procedures and policies." To more effectively measure student learning, the instruction librarians also developed pre- and post-tests this fall that will allow the library to better assess student skill acquisition.

As ACRL President Mary Reichel states in "ACRL: The learning community for excellence in

academic libraries," "the idea of learning community is a powerful concept."⁴ Reichel also notes "[s]tudents and faculty who participate in learning communities benefit from the intentional and coherent nature of clustering the courses, as well as the engagement with each other and the learning process."⁵ The partnership between the LEAP Program and the LEAPing librarians in the Marriott Library benefits students, faculty, and librarians and places the library in the middle of a successful campus learning community.

Notes

1. Donald G. Frank, Sarah Beasley, and Susan Kroll, "Opportunities for collaborative excellence: What learning communities offer," *College & Research Libraries News* 62, no. 10 (2001): 1009.

2. Ibid.

3. View *ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/ilcomstan.html>.

4. Mary Reichel, "ACRL: The learning community for excellence in academic libraries," *College & Research Libraries News* 62, no. 8 (2001): 818.

5. Ibid, 819. ■