

A Rant on “Are There Any Questions?”

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Every good speaker knows that at the end of a presentation, you have to leave time for questions. Hogwash! Leaving time for questions is the worse learning process we could have invented. We’ve all been brainwashed into the pseudo learning theory that asking for questions at the end of a presentation makes it “interactive”. Wrong!

You know what typically happens; you’ve seen it a hundred times:

The speaker gives his talk, of course going on longer than he was supposed to, leaving a slim five minutes for Q&A. But being thoroughly conditioned he asks, “Are there any questions?” An uncomfortable silence ensues. The speaker looks around anxiously, standing it as long as he can - usually about 10 seconds - then starts to make an embarrassed exit comment. Just then a member of the audience takes pity on him. The audience member, not being able to conjure up a real question within the short 10 seconds, asks an inconsequential one. Nevertheless, everyone breathes a sigh of relief because the speaker is saved from the worst of embarrassments –that there was so little interest in what he had to say that no one even had any questions!! He gratefully elaborates on the same points he has already made twice, going on as long as he can so there won’t be any more uncomfortable silences. By the time he stops someone in the audience has actually had time to come up with a reasonably pertinent question, but alas the conference timekeeper says, “Sorry I’m afraid we’re all out of time for questions. The next speaker is

“So what’s wrong with that”, you ask with considerable indignation, “surely you’re not suggesting that presenters should NOT leave time for the audience to ask questions?”

Yes, that is exactly what I am saying – because having a handful of people out of a large audience ask 2 or 3 questions does little or nothing to enhance the learning experience of the audience. In fact the whole charade is about as anti-learning as you could get. Take a hard look at it:

- For starters look at the meaning of that ubiquitous phrase, “Are there any questions?” The speaker is not asking for comments, different views on the topic, or reactions, any of which might produce some learning. No, the speaker in effect is asking, “What did I say that you did not understand or that you would like me to elaborate on because it was unclear?” That puts the audience in a bit of a pickle.

If they have understood, maybe even agreed with the speaker, what are they going to ask?

- On the other hand, if someone in the audience did disagree with the speaker, they will now have to cleverly disguise their disagreement in a question. This is accomplished by starting with a lengthy statement of one's own views then tagging on a non-question like, "So, I'm wondering if you've given that possibility any thought?" Of course, the audience knows what is happening and is reasonably tolerant of this ruse – but only up to a point. If the phony question asker goes on too long with his introductory statement, he will suffer glares and frowns from the rest of the audience who after all came to hear the speaker – not some nobody in the audience. It's a charade and the whole audience is in on the game.
- The "Are there any Questions" question loudly proclaims, "The only person in the room that has useful ideas on this topic is the speaker!" We even listen to speakers in rooms where we can look only in one direction, at the speaker in the front of the room – a clear message about who in the room is expected to have anything important to say. Never mind the reality that many audience members have in-depth experiences and deep knowledge that, could they be heard, might even enrich the understanding of the speaker. Surely, in this age of Wikis and Working Out Loud, we are years beyond the idea that a single expert has "answers." The lone expert in the front of the room, telling a naive audience what they do not know, is out of sync with our more sophisticated understanding of how knowledge is created and shared.
- And then there is the notion that we learn by listening; the research is very clear that listening, no matter how long the speaker goes on, is not enough to learn. Rather we learn when we take the time to connect new information to the store of knowledge that is already in our heads and making those connections takes time. Without processing time, what has been heard goes in one ear and out the other. We forget what was said almost as soon as we hear it.
- Moreover, as listeners, we require a way to process what we are hearing. There are lots of ways of doing that, we can talk to someone about it, write out the logic of it, draw a map, make a chart – but all of them require the active involvement of the listener– not just passive listening.

Okay, so we've got it all wrong: all those endless speeches punctuated by a few audience questions are a poor excuse for learning. Got it! What do we do about it?

Obvious, have the audience talk (or write or draw or chart). Now clearly there is not time for every member of the audience to stand up and express his or her thinking on the speaker's topic. But there is a much better way for audience members to talk at a presentation. Talk to each other!

There are lots of ways to make that happen. An easy way is, after talking for 15 or 20 minutes the speaker asks the audience a question and then puts them in small groups or pairs so they can talk to each other about what they have just heard. The more talking they do the more learning they do. Then the speaker makes a few more comments and the small groups talk about the second question.

But you say, "That takes time away from the speaker." Yes, it does. I know you paid a lot for the speaker to come and you want to get your money's worth. But remember, the goal is for audience members to go away with some new ideas – and that won't happen unless they take the time to build their own connections. Think about it this way; the speaker is not there to provide answers, rather to stimulate the thinking of the participants – and that doesn't take up the whole hour.

So if you change your habits and give the audience the time to process what you have said, then will they remember your golden words? Probably not, but they will certainly remember what they said to each other, and after all, that is what they learned!