Writing about Learning and Teaching

in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

Mick Healey, Kelly E. Matthews, and Alison Cook-Sather

ELON UNIVERSITY | CENTER FOR Engaged Learning

TALKING ABOUT LEARNING AND TEACHING

Conference and Workshop Presentations

A talk is always better if you don't just think about what you want to say, but also how your audience will respond. (Thomson 2019d)

I go, of course, for two main reasons: to share what I know and to learn what others have to say. Academic conferences are places of teaching and learning. They are also, like all social sites of learning, places to practice identities, relations to knowledge, and positions to others present or absent. I can read a published article, sure, but I also value being close to the people who have expertise, to follow close up the moves their minds make, to see what I can about who they are. I want to hear their voices, where they speak with certainty and when they pause. I go to fill up on ideas. (Robinson 2018, 144)

Presenting about learning and teaching at conferences and other scheduled meetings, such as workshops, seminars, and symposia, is a major professional activity for scholars, and it provides many opportunities and challenges that differ from other genres of scholarship. Presentations afford you opportunities to explore research ideas and findings before submitting them for formal publication, discuss published work and its application to practice, co-create new ideas, investigate research agendas, and exchange practices. Moreover, there is evidence that teaching approaches travel in large part from person to person, through personal connections, rather than through

published arguments (Huber 2009). Conferences and workshops provide important social opportunities for ideas and learning and teaching practices to travel. Although most presentations are made orally, they are usually text based, even if only in terms of speaking notes.

As emphasized in the two quotes at the beginning of this chapter, in preparing a talk you should think as much about *how* you are going to communicate effectively with your audience and how they are going to respond as about *what* you are going to say. This chapter explores ways in which you can make the most of the opportunities provided by conferences and similar meetings to share and learn about interesting learning and teaching research and practices. It will cover writing proposals and making presentations in the form of papers, workshops, and posters. The chapter concludes with a call to contribute to the redesign of these events to enhance the learning of both presenters and participants.

The Nature of Conferences

How you prepare to present at conferences and similar events depends on the presentation format (see Conference Presentations below) and the type and purpose of the event. Learning and teaching conferences range from international to institutional and from general to discipline-specific meetings. Some are small, with 30–100 delegates, and others have 500+ participants. They also vary in their purposes. Some, such as the annual conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), are primarily for researchers to present and discuss their work. Others, including many institutional and disciplinary annual conferences, aim to bring researchers and practitioners together to discuss the application of the latest research and to exchange practices. For many SoTL conferences, the distinction between researchers and practitioners is blurred and most presenters and participants have both identities.

Each of these conferences has its own culture. Hence the first step to take when deciding whether to apply to present at a particular conference—or, if you are fortunate and you receive an invitation

to give a keynote (Peseta 2018; Wilson 2018), facilitate a workshop, or contribute to a symposium—is to learn what you can about the likely participants, their backgrounds, and their expectations. What is the mixture of teaching staff and faculty, educational researchers, learning support staff, administrators, and students? Do they share the same context (e.g., from the same institution, country, discipline) or are they mixed? What prior level of knowledge and understanding do delegates have of the topic you are presenting? Talking to someone who has been to the conference before, or to the meeting organizers, is important to avoid making inappropriate assumptions about participants' identities, knowledge, and contexts.

Surprisingly little research has been undertaken into the nature, impact, and experience of academic conferences (Conference Inference Blog; Henderson, Cao, and Mansuy 2018; Popovic 2018; Rowe 2018). Nicholas Rowe (2018) reports that while delegates at scientific, academic, and professional conferences largely feel their needs are being met, they "are divided as to the long-term worth and benefit of conferences, particularly when they consider how their activities and contributions were viewed and appreciated by others" (714). The latter point reflects that while a considerable quantity of work is presented at conferences, only a relatively small proportion is available outside the event itself, and therefore its wider impact and recognition are limited (Rowe 2017).

Given that "conferences are recognised in research on academic careers as important sites which have a *plethora of indirect benefits*," there is also interest in the impact of caring responsibilities on academics' conference participation (Henderson 2019). Conferences are not neutral spaces with equal access. Institutions should consider providing extra financial support to their staff, faculty, and students with caring responsibilities and those who need care themselves, so that they may participate in conferences. Similarly, organizers need to consider how to make their conferences care-friendly by, for example, planning for how caregivers of participants may be involved in conference activities and by providing access to childcare facilities.

One of the indirect benefits of participating in conferences is the development of a network of critical friends (see chapter 26), but as Christine Cheng wisely recommends, value people—don't network. In her view, "networking is too instrumental—and it doesn't work in the context of academia. . . . What's more helpful is building a long-term relationship" (quoted in Pell 2019; see also Cheng 2019). This may be easier to achieve at smaller events.

In the remainder of this chapter we draw on the limited literature available on how to prepare conference proposals, create conference presentations, and design conferences better for learning. Participating in and helping to shape conferences are forms of creating and contributing to conversations about learning and teaching and can play a significant role in shaping your identity as a scholar (see also the series of blog posts on "Giving a Conference Paper?" that Pat Thomson curated on Wakelet).

Conference Proposals

The principles for choosing an appropriate outlet for your work are discussed in chapter 8. Regional, national, and international conferences normally require you to submit a formal proposal for peer review as much as six to nine months prior to the conference (Cassidy 2018a). Typically, regardless of the proposed format, written abstracts from 300–1,000 words are required, and they are assessed using similar criteria. For example, all submissions for the SRHE 2019 conference were judged by the following criteria:

- Originality of questions addressed
- Effective use and clear explanation of research methodology
- Clarity of the research aims and objectives and outcomes
- The extent to which the work is rooted in the relevant literature
- Significance of the research and the contribution added to what is known about the area researched

- The quality of the data (where applicable) and the reliability and significance of the conclusions
- The quality of evidence presented, whether derived from empirical work or scholarly analysis (SRHE 2019)

These criteria are not dissimilar to those used by internationally refereed journals. Most of the advice on selecting a title (see chapter 9) and writing an abstract (see chapter 10) also apply to writing conference proposals. One key difference is that many learning and teaching conferences will look at proposals not just for your content but also for how you are going to engage the audience during the presentation. As you work your way through these or other criteria, consider not only *what* you want to present but also *how* (what format). Think about how both these choices will situate you in this particular conversation about learning and teaching and contribute to the development of your identity as a scholar within that conversation. As with predatory publications, though, beware of predatory conference invitations (see chapter 8).

Conference Presentations

Most learning and teaching conferences offer a range of presentation formats, including papers, posters, workshops, symposia, and panel discussions. Some (e.g., SRHE) also offer video presentations to be inclusive of those who cannot attend in person for financial, geographical, or other reasons. Here we focus on the first three formats, as these are the most common. All may be presented individually or with co-authors.

Papers

The term "paper" is unfortunate as it suggests a written document that some presenters may be tempted to read out. The term "talk" might be more appropriate, particularly for a conference on learning and teaching. As Ronald Barnett (personal communication, July 28, 2019) suggests, audiences want you "to talk to them, as if in their

living rooms or in a café." He goes on to note that there are many challenges of public speaking:

> Eye contact with all members of an audience, speaking to the person in the back row, visibly clear PowerPoint slides, but not reading the slides, speaking to the audience, having a conversation with the audience, being a little self-referential, having some humour, keeping to time, dealing respectfully with questions, being inspiring, provoking, stimulating, energising the audience, making the audience think . . . If the furniture allows, too, clear the podium out of the way, and engage directly with the audience (with a lapel mike).

Presenters commonly have 15–20 minutes to present their papers or give their talks in sessions, which are typically 1–1.5 hours in length. They are usually allowed 5–10 minutes to respond to questions, either immediately or, where presentations are linked, as in a symposium, questions may be grouped together at the end of a session. Increasingly in learning and teaching conferences (e.g., ISSOTL, SEDA), participants are encouraged to engage with the audience. The guidance for ISSOTL presenters provides a model of good practice (Chick et al. 2017). This can be challenging when the time you have been allotted is limited, but it can be achieved using short activities, such as a "quiz," or asking participants to discuss a question in pairs and then inviting selected pairs to share their answers, either in plenary or with another pair.

If you accept Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler's (2013, 170) advice to "never write a conference paper. Always write a draft of the article that will be submitted," then many of the suggestions made in earlier chapters about writing journal articles and book chapters apply to "writing" your conference paper, including the frameworks in chapters 12-16. However, presenting a paper orally is, or should be, very different from reading out your draft. While some people read papers aloud, particularly in the humanities, we recommend against it at learning and teaching conferences. You may want to make an

outline, perhaps an annotated one with key phrases or points you want to be sure to say, but you should not prepare a text that is more appropriate for someone to read silently.

Preparation is key to a successful presentation. It is especially important to check timings and be prepared to be flexible so that you can cut portions, if on the day you unexpectedly have to complete your presentation in a shorter period than you had expected or if participants become particularly engaged in one portion of your session. If you are using a PowerPoint presentation to support your talk, try to avoid text-heavy slides; consider using images to stimulate thought, but be sure to explain them. Avoid reading directly from the slides—your audience can read as long as the font is large enough (James and Mendlesohn 2005; Mendlesohn and James 2015; Nottingham 2014; Roberts 2018).

A paper affords you an opportunity to develop and practice your scholarly voice in its spoken form, ideally in dialogue with those in your session. How people perceive what you say will shape how they see you fitting into one or more conversations about learning and teaching.

Workshops

At higher education conferences, workshops often run for 45–90 mins in parallel with other sessions, such as paper presentations and discussion sessions, although three-hour workshops are not uncommon. Pre-conference workshops are sometimes built into the program of national and international conferences and are usually scheduled for a half or whole day. Sometimes keynote speakers also offer a workshop, where the ideas outlined in their talks can be explored and applied in greater depth with a smaller group. Workshops vary in size, with 10–50 delegates being common, though we have presented workshops with over a hundred participants. Facilitator styles vary widely, but the key characteristic of workshops is that they involve participants in active learning (Barrineau, Engström, and Schnaas 2019; Barr and Tagg 1995; Healey and Roberts 2004). A presenter giving a lecture and at the end simply inviting some questions does not in our view count as a workshop (nor is it good

practice for paper presentations). For us, the quality of a workshop depends on the appropriateness and design of the activities and how they are linked to meet the objectives of the session.

Sometimes the whole of the workshop may be designed around an activity, such as a role-play exercise, or a series of activities, such as generating and sorting ideas, sharing practices in small groups, or discussing the application of materials provided by the workshop leader. In other cases, these activities may be interspersed with mini presentations by the facilitator. In these kinds of workshops, a clear structure with realistic timings is critical for the success of the session. Most will end with some action planning where delegates can reflect on the relevance and application of the ideas discussed to their own contexts. Some workshops are more fluid and begin with a negotiation with the participants on what aspects of the topic they want to discuss, perhaps with different groups focused on different aspects. Giving participants a choice in what they do helps avoid the usual practice that everyone does the same thing. Alice Cassidy (2018b) discusses different ways of involving participants, but many may be adapted from those recommended for use with students in class (Cassidy n.d.; Haynes et al. 2012; Strawson et al. 2012). You can also use workshops to invite feedback from participants to inform your scholarly thinking and writing.

Workshops afford you an opportunity to develop the pedagogical as well as scholarly aspect of your identity. One of the most exciting aspects of studying learning and teaching is that you can consider the relationship between content and process, and thinking intentionally about facilitation of a workshop, as a professional development opportunity for all involved, is part of that consideration (Torosyan and Cook–Sather 2018).

We provide below our Guiding Questions for presenting papers and workshops at learning and teaching conferences. A version you can add your answers to is available in the online resources.

Guiding Questions for Planning a Presentation at a Learning and Teaching Conference*

1. Who is your audience? How much prior knowledge will they have of your topic? How do you allow for members of the audience who come from different countries and cultures?

2. What equipment will you need? Communicate in advance with the conference organizers about computers, internet access, projectors, flipcharts, lapel or roving microphones, etc.

3. Do you need a set of PowerPoint slides? If they are needed, limit the number of words per slide and use images to stimulate thought. Avoid reading from the slides during your session.

4. How long do you have for your session? How will you split this between talking and activities? To ensure that the session is interactive, aim to have an activity at least every 15–20 minutes.

5. How will you structure your presentation? How will you grab the attention of the audience at the beginning? How will you maintain their interest during the presentation? What key message will you leave them with at the end? Consider telling stories to illustrate your talk, and think about your talk as a conversation you are having in a café. Ensure that your contribution and argument are clear to participants.

6. What activities will you include to engage participants with your topic? These can be individual as well as group activities.

7. Would it help your audience to have a copy of your slides or a handout in advance, or should you lay them out on chairs or hand them out at the door?

8. What is the physical layout of the room? Do you want, if possible, to move the chairs to encourage group discussions? Do you need to ask the participants to sit

next to some others, perhaps near the front, to encourage discussion?

9. How will you deal with the unexpected? It is best to practice the presentation out loud so that you can get the timings right and plan what you would cut, or add, if the unexpected occurs.

*As with other sets of guiding questions in this book, select those questions that are relevant to your context, add others as appropriate, and decide the order in which you will address them to communicate effectively with your audience.

Poster Presentations

At scientific conferences, posters are numerically the most prevalent way of disseminating research findings, and it is not uncommon to have several hundred posters on display in the same session (Rowe and Ilic 2015). Although posters are not used to the same extent at learning and teaching conferences, they are an important way to communicate research findings and practices. Presenting a poster can be an effective way of planning to write a paper (Thomson 2019e). Presentation software allows you to create a poster as a single slide and export it into a format that can also easily be added to a website. You can print your poster on paper or cloth, depending on whether you wish to reuse it or are worried about the ease of transporting it (Cassidy 2018b). There are numerous websites that provide guidance on designing academic posters (e.g., Pennsylvania State University 2005). Karen Manarin (2016) provides an interesting discussion of undergraduates presenting their research using posters in an English literature class that can serve as a model for learning and teaching conferences. Nicholas Rowe (2017, 143) has a useful checklist:

1. Check the author instructions for size and format before you start. Use the biggest format they allow.
2. Title: Keep titles short, meaningful, and designed to attract attention.
3. Fonts: If you are unsure of your font sizes, print samples and view from different distances. Aim for a continuity of font style and application.

4. List authors as per author guidelines. Include titles, degrees etc. only if required.
5. List affiliations briefly. Consider an institutional logo, or even a QR code that links to an appropriate web page.
6. Follow the desired formatting of the event. Use your own sub-headings to signpost the work from beginning to end.
7. Start: State your problem or issue clearly. Outline the context, then state what the work sets out to do.
8. Keep all methodologies brief and to the point.
9. Use bullets, diagrams, and spacing to break up text. Give important points their own space. You can always provide further detail in your explanations, or in supplementary material or a short paper for delegates to take away.
10. Present only a summary of your main findings, or those that are most noteworthy. Present them clearly and use illustrations/diagrams where it helps clarify the point.
11. Show clearly what your findings mean and how they offer a solution (or not) to the problem you set out to solve.
12. Identify the next steps that need to be taken, or what your findings mean for current practice. Highlight what you have achieved through your research.
13. Offer supporting references only briefly—you can include more detail separately as supporting information.
14. Give your contact details on the poster. Include a QR code that links to your institutional or professional web page. Consider business cards of your poster or make sure you have a web address that is easily photographable near your title and author information.

The traditional poster design, at least in the sciences, has recently spawned a debate, stimulated by a video made by Mike Morrison (2019) in which he critiques most posters as being overly technical and not communicating their findings effectively (Greenfieldboyce 2019). Morrison proposes instead a template in which the main research finding is placed in plain English in large letters in the center of the poster, with a brief summary elsewhere. Others have suggested variations on this design (e.g., Faulkes 2019; Vande Pol 2019). The debate highlights the importance of communicating your take-home message effectively—a theme that runs throughout this book, whether it is in the title (chapter 9), the abstract (chapter 10), the text (chapter 24), or the conclusion (chapter 30).

There is also increasing use of digital poster presentations on interactive screens. Attendees can zoom in or out and swipe to view more of your slides—important for accessibility and useful to everyone. Participants may also be able to contact you, via the e-presentation system used, to engage in a conversation regarding your poster (Masters, Gibbs, and Sandars 2015).

Poster sessions vary in their formality. If you are presenting a poster at a small- or medium-sized conference, you will often just chat with anyone who is passing who appears interested in your poster. At a large conference, you may be faced with talking to several people at the same time, in which case having a prepared set of talking points may be useful.

A poster is like an intersection of an elevator speech and a visual representation. It also affords you an opportunity both to develop your presentational voice and to be in dialogue, since conference delegates often ask questions when they stop to look at posters.

Toward Learning Conferences

Most conferences appear to be designed more for the benefit of the presenter than of the delegates (Skelton 1997). This is, perhaps, not surprising given that having an accepted presentation is often a requirement for obtaining the financial support to attend. However, it is somewhat ironic that most of our time at learning and teaching

conferences is spent listening to presentations even though we—as educational developers—know the many benefits of active involvement of participants for learning and use these active strategies with our students (Cassidy n.d.; Gibbs 1988). The argument for active learning is, if anything, stronger for adult learners (Knowles 1970). This tension between what educators preach and what they practice has not gone unnoticed (Elton 1983; Haley, Wiessner, and Robinson 2009; Kordts-Freudinger, Al-Kabbani, and Schaper 2017), and several authors have discussed the characteristics of "learning conferences" (Louw and Zuber-Skerritt 2011; Ravn 2007; Ravn and Elsborg 2007) and how to promote learning at learning and teaching conferences (Popovic and Cassidy 2018; Campbell and Popovic 2018).

Some learning and teaching conferences have moved in the direction of being more interactive and include audience engagement in their selection criteria (not applicable for posters, but essential for workshops). For example, ISSOTL specifies these requirements for conference proposals:

- Planned opportunities for active audience engagement in the session are described
- Opportunities for audience participation in the discussion are included
- Effective pedagogical practices are demonstrated. (ISSOTL 2020)

These examples are elaborated in the full ISSOTL conference pedagogy statement (Chick et al. 2017), and Jennifer Meta Robinson (2018) offers an illuminating reflection on the experience of organizing and participating at SoTL conferences.

Presenting is an opportunity to facilitate a conversation in real time and allows scholars to learn with others. At the end of your presentation, rather than asking if anyone has any questions, come up with some questions to ask the audience—this can create a focused discussion that informs their thinking. Or better yet, generate discussion throughout your presentation by pausing to ask participants to

answer questions. This is common practice in workshops and could easily be integrated into paper presentations and keynotes.

Over to You

Whether you appreciate conferences or would rather steer clear of them, there is no avoiding that they are an important facet of academic life (Thomson 2017b). If you are a discipline-based scholar interested in learning and teaching, you may have to choose between participating in a disciplinary conference or a learning and teaching one, though many larger disciplinary conferences have learning and teaching strands within them. If your disciplinary conference does not, you might consider offering to convene such a strand yourself. As a scholar of learning and teaching, you may want to consider not only how you can best benefit from the experience of participating in a conference but also how you can best help make it a learning experience for others. Questions to address about conference and workshop presentations include:

- Do you have a scholarly contribution that you would like to present at a conference or in a workshop to share findings, obtain input, or both?
- Which conferences attract the kind of participants who would be interested in your topic and with whom you want to be in conversation?
- How can you best show that you meet the proposal criteria for the conference and presentation format in which you are interested, and how does that format contribute to the development of your voice and identity as a scholar of learning and teaching?
- How can you make your conference or workshop presentation lively and interesting and, where possible, engage participants actively such that you further everyone's learning?
- If you are organizing a learning and teaching conference, how might you structure it to making it primarily a learning event?