



## 15 Recommendations for Designing and Delivering

### Effective Conference Presentations

*By Catherine Stover*

As a college faculty member, you speak to audiences both large and small on a daily basis. You know how to deliver information, create learning opportunities, and build engagement. And yet, presenting at a professional conference brings a whole new set of challenges. How do you establish credibility and authority among your peers? How do you make your session relevant for those who, unlike your students, have at least some familiarity with the topic?

Stephen D. Brookfield has been exploring adult learning strategies for four decades. He is the author of sixteen books on teaching and learning, most recently *Powerful Techniques for Teaching Adults* (Jossey-Bass, 2013). The recipient of many awards for contributions to the scholarship of adult education, Brookfield is the John Ireland Endowed Chair at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Recently, he shared his recommendations for designing conference presentations that resonate with an audience of your peers. (Links to recorded audio clips from our conversation are included below.) Here is a summary of his advice:

1. Unlike traditionally-aged students, Brookfield says, adults have a clearer sense of why they're there and what they hope to get out of any particular learning event. So, as a presenter, you need to make it clear very early on that what you're doing is going to be helpful to them, and why it's going to be helpful.
2. [The main thing to remember](#) about adults is that they bring experience to any learning situation. Get some sense of their experiences early on, even if it is only a show of hands. The feedback will give you a sense of what people bring to the session and allow you to then tie what you're going to do with the participants' past experiences.
3. Another effective thing to do at the beginning of the presentation is to start with an autobiographical hook. Talk about a problem or situation in your own experience that you've

been able to work through, and respond to, and come to some resolution about. Show how your material might be able to help them, too.

4. Many younger college students – particularly in the freshman and sophomore years – arrive on campus socialized to be passive recipients of lectures, and actually prefer it if you don't ask them too many questions. But not adults. They don't like being forced to sit through a lecture; holding their questions until the very end. There is actually a lot of classroom research which says that the main way you establish credibility is by being able to respond in the moment to an unexpected question. So, consider taking questions every ten or 15 minutes.
5. How do you engineer opportunities for questions? One way is to use a Twitter feed, which is what Brookfield does at his conference presentations. He encourages people to tweet questions, comments, and reactions, and then he checks back periodically to respond to what he is seeing in the backchannel
6. Even if your audience seems fairly homogenous, they will have a wide variety of learning preferences, habits, and different ways to process information and make meaningful connections. Your sessions should provide more than one way to learn. Brookfield's general rule for any instructional session is to have at least three learning modalities in it.
7. An example of a learning modality is ["Chalk Talk,"](#) which is where the instructor poses a question on the board at the front of the room and gives the audience five minutes to come up to the board and respond to the question. Typically, four or five people will write at a time.. This approach gives introverts and those who need more time to pull their thoughts together a chance to do that. It also minimizes anxiety for those who don't like to speak their answers aloud because they fear they won't look smart and sound articulate.
8. Another effective learning modality is called "Circle of Voices." Instead of saying, "Talk in your small groups about this question for three or four minutes," consider giving this protocol: First, there is one minute of silence where everyone makes mental or written notes. Then, each person in the group can take up to a minute to respond to the question that was posed. No interruptions are allowed. After everyone has had their say, you move into open conversation. Now the ground rule is that you can only talk about what somebody else said in the opening round. By doing this, you show that listening carefully is the most important part of a discussion, not speaking a lot and sounding smart.
9. A third method is called "Circular Response." If you have a session with 25 or 30 people, break into two groups of equal size. Each person gets to speak for one minute with no interruptions. After the first person speaks, the second person has to respond to the first person's comments. Each person's comments are framed by what the previous person says. After everyone speaks, you can move into open conversation. Like Circle of Voices, this method encourages listening. It

also gets the conversation to zero in on two or three themes that keep being revisited, instead of 15 different themes.

10. One good way to end the presentation is by asking the audience how they will use the information that they've been exposed to in the conference session. For example, you might want to use the Chalk Talk method and write on the board "How will I implement or apply or adapt the technique that we have tried out in this session when I return to my institution?"
11. If you use a Twitter backchannel during your presentation, at the end of the session, you might look up and see that there are two or three themes emerging from the questions. Maybe the same dynamic keeps resurfacing in a slightly different way. Addressing these sorts of questions can be a nice way to finish the presentation off.
12. Sometimes you will find that there are a few people in the audience who have a tendency to dominate the conversation. Your job is to intervene as best as you can when that happens. One way to do this is to say, "Can we use the three-person rule for the next 15 minutes?" The three-person rule says that after you speak, you can't speak again until at least three other people have spoken. It's an easy rule to remember, and it tends to stop the overly enthusiastic people from taking over the conversation.
13. Sometimes, if it seems like the discussion is going in too many directions at once, it can help to stop the discussion for a minute or two. Say, "Okay, I'd like you to write this question down and think about your answer." This helps the people who just need more time to process, think, and frame what they want to say.
14. Another technique to consider using when the discussion splinters into eight or nine different directions is to say, "Of the themes that we have going here, there are one (or two) that are perhaps most fruitful and most problematic, and therefore most important for us to go into." Remember, if you have broken your presentation into 10 or 15 minute [chunks](#), you only have five to 10 minutes for questions after each chunk. You have to be clear about what you want to accomplish and stay on schedule.
15. Finally, understand that it's very common to feel like an [imposter](#) when giving a presentation at a conference. "Impostership" is the sense that a lot of us carry, according to Brookfield. You might think, "Well, I can fool my students, but there's no way I can fool my colleagues. They'll get up and walk out because as soon as I start speaking, they'll realize that I know no more than they do." It's a normal feeling as you're giving a conference presentation. You're not going to please everyone. But if you demonstrate humble confidence, learn about and from your audience, break your presentation into chunks, use multiple modalities, ask and answer questions, and deliver what you promise, you will have done your job.

*Stephen D. Brookfield will be giving a plenary address at the 2014 Teaching Professor Annual Conference in Boston. Catherine Stover is the managing editor at Magna Publications.*