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How to chair an academic session: some thoughts

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Have you ever given a paper where the organiser forgot your name, topic, affiliation or all three? Have you ever given a paper where the organiser failed to turn up? In both cases, they have done you a great favour: they have shown you the importance of academic chairing.

This short note presents some of my thoughts on being a successful chair of a session either in an academic seminar or conference. It assumes a standard one-and-a-half-hour session with three speakers giving papers of twenty minutes each, plus ten minutes each for questions, but it can be easily adapted to other formats. In the delicate and often volatile dynamic of an academic session the chair is a crucial person and can often make or break an event. The chair sets the tone for what is to come and has the power to control the pace and intensity of proceedings. A chair often provides vital support to speakers, especially to those who may be less experienced or confident. From an audience's point of view, a chair's leadership can inspire fruitful debate and bring humour and cordiality to even a dry theoretical discussion. For all those reasons the neglected role of the academic chair is being highlighted here.

Everyone likes to chair differently. My approach is to present each speaker in turn, showing knowledge of their work as much as possible and trying to find an overall theme for the session being held. A considerable amount of preparation is required for this, which may include researching each speaker's work in the weeks leading up to the event and if necessary asking the speaker for additional information. Also, one ought to rehearse (silently and aloud) the prefatory statements and introductions, exactly as one would do before giving any paper or presentation. Very few people present a paper from memory; most of us rely on notes or a fully-scripted text. It may be the case, therefore,

that when it comes to off-the-cuff chairing, this is not a sign of rhetorical skill and flair but of bad preparation. Part of the preparation required is deciding when to take questions. Some people favour questions straight away and some reserve all questions for a Q+A session at the end. The nature of the papers and their interrelation would suggest what would work best for an individual session.

On my second point, finding an overall theme for the session that is held, that could mean relating the different papers by highlighting common threads. If possible, it may be a good idea for the chair to have seen drafts of all the papers beforehand. It would also be good if the chair could circulate papers between the speakers in advance, so that they could integrate comments into their presentations. This would give a real feel of teamwork and will make the whole session seem much more polished. Asking the first question after each paper is another technique people use when chairing, to get things started. That might be nice to do as a way of honouring your speaker even if there is plenty of response from the audience and little need for intervention. Some people go further and ask their speakers in advance if there is a question they would particularly welcome. I personally prefer not to do that, as I like to keep things spontaneous, but it is perfectly legitimate. If there is time, a closing remark would be welcome after all three papers are delivered.

An invitation to a post-seminar drink may also be in order at this point. Clarity in this matter is key, as people are sometimes confused about what will happen after a seminar and who is invited. My personal preference is for an open invitation to a drink rather than a silent, mysterious selection of a few fortunate individuals who get to have dinner with the speakers. But that kind of decision is often up to the host. If you chair for them just make sure you know what the score is in advance so that you can give clear signals to your audience.

Irrespective of the thoroughness of your preparation, on the day itself you might like to have another chat with the speakers just before the session. That is in order to get a sense of teamwork going between the four of you. This is

sometimes quite difficult to achieve, as there is plenty of socialising going on and the distractions of food and drink. If you know the speakers well you may have established the required rapport already. In an ideal world the chair would have chosen and gathered the speakers and have commissioned the papers presented. That is otherwise known as 'organising a session' and it looks fabulous on postgraduate CVs. When the chair is also the session organiser, good chairing comes more naturally, as the knowledge, energy and effort required will have been built into the process.

On a more practical note, it is really important to keep to time. If you follow the standard format that is 20 mins for each speaker, ten minutes for questions after each paper, or half an hour for questions at the end. It may be useful to remind speakers when they have 5 mins and then when they have 2 mins left. Some people use a notepad or pretty postcard to do that. Keeping to time is vital for the smooth running of events and its importance cannot be overstressed. It is amazing how busy academic audiences seem to be: people often get up and leave in the middle of things, never mind after the advertised ending time of an event. In any case, please make sure you have a watch or stopwatch or some other way to keep track of time. Your speakers may not have brought a watch or may not want to keep checking the time while speaking, which admittedly looks ugly and awkward. It may be good to remind your speakers before the session that you have to be strict about keeping to time.

Keeping to time is their part of the bargain. Yours is to be sure that the audio-visual equipment works perfectly. More than half of academic presentations encounter technical problems and seminars are all the poorer for it. Although speakers have become wiser to it and make contingencies, many speakers are quite thrown by such deficiency and get upset. This is justifiable and the least you can do is show respect and not be dismissive of their feelings. Another practical tip is to be sure the speakers are supplied with water. If you can give them a choice of still or sparkling even better, as it will make them feel looked after. Twenty minutes or longer is a long time to be speaking and a sip of water now and then refreshes body and mind and calms nerves.

It is hoped that these thoughts will help others who may be on their way to organising their first big-scale event or chairing their first academic session. Being a chair is a position of honour and trust and it is not always treated as such. Maybe initiating a debate about chairing will sow the seeds of change. If you are the organiser of an event you may consider giving your chairs some gentle guidelines (without stepping on their toes) to ensure that they put some of themselves into the role.

Before I close I must stress the personal nature of all chairing. We all learn from how others think or from how they do things, but such knowledge can only take us so far. The ultimate reality is that the most important ingredient that will ensure successful chairing is that you chair *your way*. Finally, if you are the organiser of an event but have invited somebody else to chair for you, you may like to write a card or note on smart paper and leave it at their desk. It could say something like: 'I hope you enjoy chairing for us, and again thank you very much for your kind offer to do it'. If we want to change the culture of under-valued chairing, ourselves may be the place to start. I am sure that when Gandhi said: 'be the change you want to see in the world', he was not thinking of academic chairing. Yet, by applying big ideas to small problems we may be at least able to solve those small problems. I am fairly confident that appreciation and gratitude towards academic chairs will oblige.