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## CONFESSIONS OF A CONFERENCE GOER

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I might as well come right out with it. I'm the victim of a strange, debilitating malady that I suffer every time I attend a professional conference. After years of struggling privately with my condition, I've decided to go public because I wonder if anyone else is experiencing it. Let me describe the symptoms.

The problem usually starts when the moderator of a session I've wandered into rises to make the customary announcement: "There should be a few minutes for discussion after the papers have been read. The presenters ask that you hold all of your questions and comments until then." Those around me seem to take this prohibition calmly, but I begin to get disturbing mental pictures of muzzled dogs, gagged kidnap victims, or unhappy children being told to shut up or go play in the back yard. The malady is upon me.

I try to fight it, but my difficulties increase when the first presenter takes a stand behind the podium; plops down a huge stack of typed pages; and reads off the title, pausing briefly in the middle for the inevitable colon. I am no longer in control. Against my will, my mind begins constructing the many fantasies I use to escape the role of subordinate, muzzled listener.

One of my favorites is to imagine what it would be like to run conference sessions like the old television show *Queen for a Day*. I envision applause meters in all of the meeting rooms and a washing machine being awarded to the best-received presenter at each session. (It would give the audience something to do.) Then I think about what would happen if the folks at ABC Sports started producing our conferences. To add a little excitement, they would probably hand out number cards to the listeners, who could hold them up at the end of each presentation like judges at a gymnastics competition. The moderator could play the sports announcer's role: "Let's see what the judges thought of your presentation, Ms. Jones: 9.6, 9.2, 9.7, 9.3. . . . I wonder what you said to offend that little red-faced man waving a 1."

When the smattering of applause and the movement at the close of a session disrupt my fantasies, I search the faces of my fellow listeners, hoping for a sign that I am not alone—that others suffer my malady. Occasionally, in desperation, I'll turn to the person next to me and say, "A perfect 10! We'll be seeing her on Wheaties boxes soon" or "I wonder how he's going to get that washing machine home." But I always get a blank look instead of the brief smile of recognition I'm after.

After undertaking an extensive self-analysis, I've come to the following conclusion: either I'm maladjusted or there is something wrong with the way we, as a profession, are conducting our conferences. Since I've already made a convincing case for the first possibility, let me explore the second one for a moment.

Is it possible, do you think, that I'm struggling with the same feelings of alienation experienced by students in traditional, teacher-centered classrooms, where the wise instructor imparts knowledge and the ignorant students receive it, mute except for an occasional question permitted at the end of class? If the answer is "yes," some other questions naturally follow: Is there a distressing contradiction between our new pedagogy, which emphasizes such values as collaborative learning, process, and dialogue, and the format of our conferences, which emphasizes individual authority, product, and monologue? Are we working within a new paradigm in our classrooms and returning to an old one when we gather in New Orleans or Atlanta? Are we vacillating between Ptolemy and Copernicus?

I can't help but wonder if others share my feelings. Does it bother anyone else to hear so much about process and the advantages of responding to student writing in the early stages when most of the presenters are describing the outcomes of research or the results of instruction, leaving the listeners nothing to do but critique the finished product?

Does it bother anyone else to hear someone read word for word from a neatly typed paper on the use of language to discover and explore one's thoughts?

Does it bother anyone else to hear about the use of dialogue to create a learning community from a speaker who seems to be reading to himself while the listeners wander in and out, moving from one session to another like discontented television viewers forever changing the channel?

Does it bother anyone else to hear about democratizing the classroom at conventions where only a privileged few—an oligarchy—are empowered to speak from a position of authority?

To me, these contradictions are not only disturbing; they are destructive. How can we nurture our new pedagogical values in an atmosphere that chokes them? It seems as futile as running antipornography ads in *Hustler* magazine. The medium subverts the message.

When opportunities for genuine interaction such as workshops, special interest groups, and sessions featuring discussion and debate are part of a professional gathering, their relatively low status is obvious. Often scheduled during the days before and after the actual conference or during the evenings, they are clearly peripheral to the main business: the reading and hearing of papers. Those unorthodox sessions that do get to compete with the traditional ones in the main program are usually highlighted to look like specially marked local entrees on an otherwise epicurean menu. Instead of reforming the old system, we merely embellish it.

Because of our reluctance to break with tradition, our conferences have all the excitement of a student piano recital. One performer after another trots up on stage, nervously clutching music that will be played note for note except for the mistakes; the listeners follow along on programs, applauding weakly at the end of each piece; and everyone is a bit relieved when it's all over. The whole affair is static, staid, staged. Contrast that with jazz musicians getting together to jam. When they sit down to play, they enter into a collaboration whose outcome is uncertain. Their purpose is not to perform, but to explore—to see what emerges from the pooling of their talents and energies. As the lead moves from instrument to instrument, each participant becomes both audience and performer, sharing in a sense of community created through musical dialogue.

To make the jam a controlling metaphor for our conferences, we must stop reading papers to each other and start talking. None of us would write a letter to a colleague, board a plane with

it, and read it to the recipient upon arrival. Yet that's essentially what "delivering a paper" at a conference involves. Our strong commitment to written language makes us forget that one of its primary functions is to overcome a spatial separation between the sender and receiver of a message. When we gather for a conference, we temporarily overcome that separation and its limitations. By collectively paying millions of dollars to various airlines and a huge hotel somewhere, we create a situation in which we can comment and respond without having to rely on

*College English*. However, instead of setting aside writing for a few days and exploiting the fluid, interactive nature of talk, we read articles to each other, confounding the two modes of communication in a schizophrenic, mind-numbing way. To get our money's worth, we need a moderator who will stand up, turn to the presenters, and say: "There should be a few minutes for reading aloud after the discussion. The audience asks that you hold all of your papers until then."

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