The Roles and Responsibilities of MWERA Participants: An Update to the Conversation

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Abstract

This article is an update of the Daytner (2006) article, The roles and responsibilities of MWERA participants: Building a scholarly community by presenting, responding, and attending. In 2006, Daytner reviewed Barton's (2005) discussion of the responsibilities of discussants, session chairs, and audience members at AERA's annual meeting, applied Barton's information to MWERA's Annual Meeting, and described the responsibilities of conference presenters. This article includes much of the 2006 material as well as an additional section on three principles related to presenter responsibilities: the appropriate use of visual materials, using technology, and bringing hard copies of papers to the conference.

> *Regardless of our role, the quality of public conversations depends on our commitment to the greater good of the academic community* (Barton, 2005, p. 27).

A short time after attending the 2005 Mid-Western Educational Research Association (MWERA) conference, I received the December issue of the *Educational Researcher*. In this issue, there was an article by Keith C. Barton about the roles of discussants, session chairs, and audience members at the AERA Conference. After reading the article, I decided an article for MWERA members might be a valuable tool for discussing the responsibilities related to the various roles of participants at MWERA conferences. Therefore, in sharing my perspective, I hope to elicit a conversation that will advance the organization.

There are many reasons why researchers and practitioners attend regional conferences. For some, it fulfills the requirements needed for tenure and promotion. It also provides an opportunity to share one's ideas and research with others and receive feedback regarding those ideas. Practitioners can learn new methods for their teaching or create networks with others for collaboration. Still others view regional conferences as a way for young scholars, including graduate students, to "get their feet wet" in the profession. No matter what the reason for attending a regional conference, I would argue we all play vital roles and have certain responsibilities as participants. In this essay I will share my views of these roles and responsibilities by expanding upon some of the ideas expressed by Barton (2005).

Barton's View of Roles

Barton (2005) does not specifically explain why he decided to write the article, but he does state that he has "become frustrated because we share too few expectations for the contributions of participants who are not delivering the papers" (p. 24). He feels that more meaningful dialogue could come from conferences if discussants, session chairs, and audience members, adhered to certain principles. For each of these groups he listed three principles that he believes would help to enhance the dialogue of educational research. In the sections below, I will discuss these groups and describe how the principles he recommends are related to MWERA. I will also share some principles that I feel may be missing or may be unique to MWERA. I conclude with a discussion of the responsibilities of presenters, a group excluded by Barton, since they are an essential part of the Association.

The Responsibilities of Discussants

Barton (2005) identified three rules that he believed discussants should follow in order to promote a scholarly exchange of ideas. These are: (1) discuss the papers; (2) balance synthesis and individual attention; and (3) balance praise and criticism. Barton argues that the main responsibility of discussants is the thoughtful discussion of the papers presented in the session. He states that audience members look to a discussant to provide some analysis and synthesis of the papers and therefore often feel shortchanged when a discussant defers to the question-and-answer period rather than providing any unique insights. Further, frustration occurs when discussants describe their own work extensively or choose to use their time to argue some cause they feel strongly about. In fact, Barton recommends that individuals only take the role of discussant if they are "willing to do the hard work of reading, reflecting, writing, and practicing" (p. 24).

The other two rules that Barton (2005) identifies for discussants provide specific information about how the discussion of the papers should proceed in order to remain appropriately balanced. First, Barton argues that discussants should be sure to comment on each individual paper to provide the presenters feedback on their work. However, he also states that it is equally important for discussants to provide a meaningful synthesis of the work so that, "… conference attendees come away with a better understanding of the significance of individual papers" (p. 25). Furthermore, he argues that discussants have the responsibility to provide a balanced evaluation of the individual work, one that addresses both the strengths and limitations.

As someone who has served as a discussant, I found the advice from Barton to be especially beneficial in my own thinking about the role of a discussant. In fact, his discussion regarding a balanced review has led me to think about how valuable it would be if discussants provided each presenter with a brief outline of the main evaluation points. Then, if a discussant is limited on time, the presenters still receive balanced feedback for their work. Presenters can use this information to improve their work for publication. Discussants might see outlines as a way to share their expertise in a personally meaningful way and outlines might serve as a useful artifact for tenure. Therefore, I challenge all discussants, including myself, to think about providing written feedback to each presenter when they serve as discussants in the future.

The Responsibilities of Session Chairs

According to Barton (2005), the three main responsibilities of session chairs are to: (1) take charge, (2) introduce the session and speakers, and (3) provide context and structure. In taking charge, Barton believes session chairs should make sure that presenters get their papers to discussants well in advance of the conference; he recommends a minimum of 4 weeks. He believes it is the session chair's responsibility, not the discussant's responsibility, to take care of this organizational matter. Furthermore, he argues that taking charge also involves keeping a strict time line for presentations to ensure that all of the session's components (presentations, discussant comments, and question-answer portions) receive adequate time. I would add that taking charge also means that session chairs should contact all of the participants in their session(s) to ensure that the participants understand what their responsibilities entail. This is especially important for young scholars who may be presenting at a conference for the very first time. Young scholars may receive advice from their mentors regarding presentations, but each conference is unique and presenters need to know their specific responsibilities for the MWERA conference. Another aspect of taking charge that is unique to the MWERA conference is the session evaluation form. Session chairs have a responsibility to ensure that each audience member and presenter receives an evaluation form at the beginning of the session to be completed at the end of the session. Once the evaluations have been completed, the session chair should collect the evaluations and deposit them at the registration desk. These evaluations are important because they provide the MWERA Association Council information about the conference that can be used to help make improvements for future conferences. These evaluations are analyzed every year by the Member-at-large and presented to the Council.

Principle 2, introducing the session and speakers, involves the responsibilities of welcoming the audience, introducing the session (including the sponsoring division), and introducing the speakers and discussant. Barton (2005) argues that these components are important for setting the tone for the session. Principle 3, providing context and structure, builds upon the second principle. After the introductions, Barton states that the session chair has a responsibility to provide a brief explanation of "the substantive content of the session" (p. 26) to provide audience members with a context for the information. I would add that to provide this context it is important that the session chairs read all of the papers prior to the conference. As recommended by MWERA, I encourage all presenters to send their papers to the chair as well as the discussant so that the chair can thoughtfully present the context. Finally, Barton argues session chairs should also provide structure for the session by taking control of the question-and-answer portion so that no one person asks all of the questions or makes all of the comments and that multiple presenters have the opportunity to respond to the questions posed.

The Responsibilities of Audience Members

The final group of participants that Barton (2005) discussed was audience members. According to Barton, audience members should adhere to three rules of participation. First, he argues that audience members should show respect for the presenters by remembering the rules of etiquette for active listening from things like not talking to one's neighbor to not passing notes to shutting off cell phones prior to the start of a session. Second, Barton argues that audience members should become engaged in the session by asking specific questions directed toward the presentations; often these questions can result in meaningful dialogue. I would add that I believe audience members should not be afraid to ask questions that might provide some critique of the work. If framed constructively, presenters might discover some valuable insights about their work. Finally, Barton argues that audience members need to focus on the presenters. That is, audience members should not use the question-and-answer time to share their own views, experiences, and research. The emphasis should be on the presenters' work.

One responsibility I would add for the audience members of MWERA is the responsibility to complete the evaluation forms that are provide at the beginning of the session. The evaluation provides the MWERA Association Council valuable information about the different sessions that may be used to make improvements in the future. Depending upon the data collected, I would argue that the evaluation has the potential to also provide the presenters valuable information. Currently, the Member-at-large tabulates the evaluation scores and shares this information with the Council. It would be a real benefit to MWERA presenters if they were provided a brief summary of the relevant information and feedback that they received for their individual sessions, based upon the evaluation summary that is currently done for the Council. This feedback could assist presenters in their future presentations.

The Responsibilities of Presenters

As mentioned previously, Barton (2005) excludes from his article a discussion of the responsibilities of presenters. I am not certain why he chose to exclude this group; however, I believe that the inclusion of this group in the conversation is important. Presenters are no less important than any other group that is part of a conference. In fact, many conference presenters are looking for advice regarding their responsibilities. In this section, I will describe four principles that I believe frame the expectations of presenters.

1. *Register for and attend the conference*. This responsibility probably seems obvious to most people, but, unfortunately, as a previous division chair, I know that it does not always happen. If someone takes the time and effort to submit a proposal, the presenter has a professional obligation to register for the conference, attend, and present the paper. Much time and effort goes into reviewing proposals, organizing sessions, organizing the conference, and then printing materials for the conference. The registration fee helps to offset the costs incurred by the organization in holding the conference. In addition, part of the success of a conference is in the papers presented during sessions. These papers are carefully organized into meaningful groupings so that, as a collective body of work, the papers can further develop scholarly dialogue. I understand that some extreme and unanticipated circumstances may result in an author not being able to present a paper. When this happens the presenter should contact the session chair as soon as possible so that adjustments can be made. If the presenter has already completed the paper, I recommend either having another person present the paper or sending copies of the paper to the session chair for distribution.

2. *Write and present a paper*. In recent years, it seems that some presenters have drifted from the time-honored tradition of writing a paper to present. It is becoming more common for individuals to create a PowerPoint presentation rather than an actual paper. I think PowerPoint is a valuable tool for presenting one's work. However, I also feel that scholarship is more than the verbal presentation of a bulleted list of ideas. Scholarship involves the creation of a written manuscript that is available for public consumption by both conference attendees and those who are unable to attend the conference. As scholars we have a personal responsibility to ensure that our work is available in written form. Furthermore, one purpose of conferences is to get feedback on papers that one hopes to eventually submit for publication. A full paper lends itself more to this type of feedback.

As I argue that it is important to write a manuscript for a paper presentation, I find myself faced with a contradiction. This contradiction involves whether copies of the paper should be brought to the conference or sent upon request after the conference. While I feel that it is important to have papers available to those who are interested, I also find myself concerned about the potential amount of wasted paper. I have found myself frustrated when I made copies of a paper only to find out that the audience size was smaller than I had anticipated or that some people were not interested in having a copy of the paper. Therefore, in terms of conservation of resources, I think it is appropriate to bring a few copies of the paper along with a brief synopsis (an outline or a page of slides from one's presentation) to hand out to all members of the audience. As part of the synopsis, the presenter should include contact information so that a copy of the paper can be sent to those people who would like a copy for their reference.

3. *Send your paper to the session chair and discussant in a timely fashion*. As stated by Barton (2005), tradition holds that papers should be submitted to session chairs and discussants at least 4 weeks prior to the conference. This time frame will allow the session chair to create a brief overview of the session and it will give the discussant adequate time to read and analyze the papers as well as create a synthesis. Presenters unable to meet this deadline should contact both the chair and discussant by e-mail and get the paper submitted at least 2 weeks prior to the conference. When a paper is not submitted to the discussant in a reasonable timeframe this detracts from the important synthesis that could have been offered.

4. *Be aware of the importance of time*. Time is one of the most important ingredients in any conference session. As a presenter it is very important to arrive at the session early, no matter what time of day the presentation occurs. The time before the session gives the session chair one last opportunity to ensure that everyone understands the session schedule. It is also important for presenters to make sure that their presentations stay within the assigned time limit. In general if there are four papers, the time limit for each presentation is 12 minutes and if there are three papers, the time limit for each presentation is 15 minutes. These time limits ensure that there is time for the introduction, presentation, discussant commentary, and question-and-answer portions. Presenters should practice their presentations ahead of time to make sure they fit within the time limit. Also, most session chairs provide some indication when time is running out, such as a hand signal or a card with numbers. Presenters should acknowledge this information and respect other presenters by wrapping up their comments.

Additional Presenter Responsibilities

After receiving feedback on the 2006 article and attending various sessions at last year's Annual Meeting, three additional principles emerged as important for discussion. These principles deal with the appropriate use of visual materials, using technology, and bringing hard copies of papers to the Annual Meeting.

1. *Use visual presentation materials appropriately.* Presenting a paper in a limited time frame is no easy task. In the past, presentations often involved simply reading the paper. This style of presentation should no longer be used. Instead presenters are expected to present a summary of their papers in a way that catches the audience's attention. Many presenters accomplish this task by using visual aids.

At the MWERA Annual Meeting, each meeting room contains a screen and an overhead projector. Presenters are encouraged to use these resources for their presentations. The effective use of an overhead is no small matter. When creating overheads, I have a few recommendations to keep in mind. First, make sure that the print you use is large enough for the entire audience to read. Generally, 20 point font is large enough; if not, adjust the machine (including where it is located in the room relative to the screen) to ensure the text is readable. PowerPoint is often used to make slides that are converted to overheads. The font and style of PowerPoint make for a professional look, but be careful that the slides fit on the overhead so that the entire slide can be read. Also, be discriminate as to what you include on an overhead. The overhead should highlight the main points only and not include paragraphs of text. Paragraphs are too difficult and time consuming for people to read. Third, I encourage everyone to bring an electronic copy of their presentation with them to the conference in case an error is found on an overhead or an overhead is misplaced. Presenters should plan to be at their sessions early to ensure their overheads are readable.

2. *Use technology responsibly*. As mentioned in the previous section, MWERA provides only a screen and an overhead projector. Presenters who wish to use other types of technology (such as a computers, projectors, and DVD players) must either reserve (and pay for) this technology in advance or bring their own technology to the conference. In either case, presenters should be familiar with the technology they will be using since they will be responsible for its set up and use and may need to coordinate technology with other presenters in the session. Presenters who will be using technology for their presentations should plan to be at their session early so that the session will be able to start on time. Often there is limited time between sessions, so I recommend setting up the technology outside of the room and then moving it into the room when it is available. This will help to identify problems well in advance so that they can be taken care of prior to the presentation. As with the overheads, it is important that presenters limit the amount of information included on any one page. Also, I strongly encourage presenters who plan to use technology during their presentations to have a set of overheads as a back up in case they encounter a problem they are unable to fix.

3. *Bring a hard copy of your paper to the conference.* In the article I wrote last year (see *The Responsibilities of Presenters*, Principle 2), I talked about the obligation of presenters to write a paper, not just present a series of bulleted points. I want to reiterate this point here. Presenters are expected to write a manuscript that is available for public consumption. It is the expectation of the professional organization.

In addition, presenters are expected to bring copies of that manuscript to the conference to disseminate to conference attendees. Previously (see *The Responsibilities of Presenters*, Principle 2), I discussed a personal dilemma I felt regarding the bringing of papers to the conference. After attending last year's conference, it became clear to me that as professionals, we have an obligation to write, present (not read), and distribute our papers to our audiences. It is not enough to bring the presentation only. People need to have access to our work as we are presenting it so that they can follow along and develop useful and relevant questions. I recommend that each presenter bring 10 to 15 copies of their paper to the conference. If there are more audience members than papers, presenters can ask people to share during the presentation and then send copies after the conference to those who did not receive one.

Final Comments

People participating in the MWERA conference have a personal responsibility to make the conference a meaningful experience. Each group plays an important role in ensuring that the greatest potential for each session is reached. All participants have the potential to make important contributions to the field through their active engagement at the conference. I encourage all of us to think about our roles and responsibilities and to work toward making improvements in these areas. In closing, I challenge the members of MWERA to reflect upon my comments and to maintain the conversation about these issues. Let's keep the conversation going…

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References

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