Communications of the Association for Information Systems

Discussants and the Quality of Interactions at Conferences

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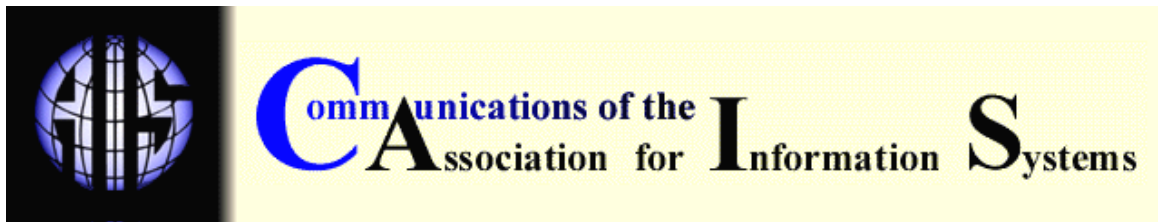
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DISCUSSANTS AND THE QUALITY OF INTERACTION AT CONFERENCES

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ABSTRACT

Discussants play an important role in conferences, yet little practical advice exists to help them make best use of their time beyond informal guidelines. Two new approaches to the intellectual discussion of conference papers are introduced: Group Support Systems and Conversational Learning. The discussant's role is illustrated with reference to each of these approaches. Recommendations for discussant practice are presented.

Keywords: discussants, guidelines for practice, intellectual discussion, group support systems, conversational learning

I. INTRODUCTION

While discussants are not yet ubiquitous, they are a key component of academic conferences such as the annual International Conference on Information Systems and the Academy of Management meetings. Discussants are charged with an important responsibility, bridging the gap between presenter and audience, offering (ideally) new insights and so stimulating the audience. They may also identify issues of interest to the presenters whether in terms of improving the current research or identifying opportunities for future work. Given this responsibility, a clear need exists for discussants to adhere to high standards of professional etiquette so that presenters and audience alike receive maximum benefit from their inclusion in the proceedings, though benefits for discussants themselves are not inconsiderable. Informal codes of practice and policies regarding discussant contributions are promulgated by the Academy of Management as a whole (see for instance the material on how to make AoM sessions exciting [AoM, 2002]), by individual divisions [Ledford, 1994], and by individuals (see Weick's [1999] notes for discussants first presented at a workshop at the 59th Academy of Management conference).

Notwithstanding the efficacy of these informal notes, it may be helpful to offer a more detailed treatment of methods that discussants (and session chairs) can use to enhance the quality of interactions between paper presenter and audience. Two such methods are presented and discussed in this paper.

The motivation for writing this paper lies in the author's experience (as presenter, discussant, and audience member) at academic conferences and the value added (or sadly taken away) by the

discussant. All too often, we attend sessions where the discussant takes all the available interaction time, leaving none for the audience. The quality of the discussant's contribution can vary considerably, from a summary of a paper, through elicitation of critical new ideas that can inform future work and in addition provoke the audience into spirited discussion. The material presented by the discussant may be of great value to the presenter, but of little interest to the audience. This disconnect is particularly likely to be the case when the discussant sees his/her role as a reviewer, which Weick [1999] cautions against. A tension, even a conflict of interest, is inevitable between what the presenter needs from a discussant and what the audience needs. Resolving this tension is undoubtedly challenging. It is hoped that this article will help facilitate resolution for discussants.

Following this introduction, key issues in the very limited literature on this topic are presented, with current recommendations for discussants highlighted (Section II). Two new methods that may add significant value to the discussant process are introduced and explained in Section III. These methods involve

- the groupware technology Group Support Systems, and

- Conversational Learning.

A practical example of how each of these methods is already being used to enhance the quality of interactions is presented. Finally, in Section IV, recommendations are made for discussant practice.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

DISCUSSANT ACTIVITIES

A number of pertinent activities (and non-activities) for discussants can readily be identified in the literature [e.g. Coff and Zhou, 1999; Weick, 1999; Hamermesh, 1993]. These activities include the need for discussants to identify shared constructs, linked findings, contradictory results and ongoing debates in the field that are of relevance to the paper under discussion. Slightly different approaches are advised for situations where papers are received some time in advance rather than the night before the presentation. Weick [1999] suggests that it is very helpful for the audience if the discussant can identify the core issues in each paper and attempt an enthusiastic analysis, making a reasonable attempt to improve it. This idea is echoed by Hamermesh [1993, p.35] who also cautions discussants "to avoid nastiness". Not surprisingly, discussants are admonished that it is unacceptable to use their privileged position as a forum for their own results: "you were invited to improve someone else's work, not hawk your own wares" [ibid.].

DISCUSSANT'S ROLE

The role of a discussant is generally quite different from that of a reviewer. Weick [1999] suggests that discussants and reviewers should have different mindsets. A discussant does not need to ask questions about how (or if) the paper makes a contribution to knowledge, but rather should be identifying and discussing important issues in the paper. Guidelines for reviewers are available separately: see for instance Lee's [1995] extensive notes on the subject.

ADVANCE AVAILABILITY vs. LAST-MINUTE AVAILABILITY

Where papers are available in advance, Weick [1999] suggests that the discussant too must prepare in advance, reading each paper several times, identifying/defining the key terms and locating hypothetical leads for discussion. He recommends that well motivated discussants should "develop a coherent argument within their allotted time and have something interesting to say". They can consider questions such as:

- What are the implications of this research?

- How could the arguments be developed further?

- Is something missing here?

- What are the key citations and non-citations?

- What key points from the paper did not make it into the presentation – and so need highlighting by the discussant?

In contrast to this position of treating each paper individually, and presumably on its own merits, Coff and Zhou [1999] suggest that a more integrated approach should be attempted, identifying common themes across papers in a single session.

If papers are not available in advance, Weick [1999] recommends taking copious notes in such a way that you can comment on your own notes (e.g. by using a 2-column format), thinking about title appropriateness, asking the audience for a lead in to the discussion, even skim reading a newspaper before the session and linking a key theme of a paper back to an article in the newspaper. Hamermesh [1993] is rather dismissive of papers that only arrive the night before, considering that the author evidently doesn't care too much for the discussant's opinion and so recommends that discussants either refuse to discuss the paper altogether, thus giving more time to better prepared authors, or to provide no more than an abbreviated set of comments.

INTELLECTUAL DISCUSSION

Tracy and Baratz [1993] report on a qualitative study that investigated participant attitudes towards the intellectual discussion that took place in a departmental colloquium/seminar series. While this forum is not the same as that of a conference session, there are evident parallels that help shed light on the activities in which discussants engage. Both involve presentations followed by question/answer-based discussions. Furthermore, both have similar purposes, viz.: dissemination and discussion of research. Both also involve similar audiences - academics and research students. As Tracy and Baratz [1993] note, intellectual discussion takes place and is socialised in institutional settings such as these. Such settings can be characterised by status hierarchies, existing relationships and concerns to socialise new members, amongst other factors.

Dabbs [1985, p.183] suggests that "in purely intellectual discussion, ideas are more central than social relationships". Furthermore, he suggests that how interlocutors "feel about one another is not an issue" [ibid, p.184]. Although this might be the case ideally, Tracy and Baratz [1993, p.302] suggest that "status difference is a fundamental part" of the intellectual context. It is often quite difficult for people to leave their status or rank behind and so for all to participate as true equals. In conjunction with this concern for status differences, Tracy and Baratz [1993] usefully refer to the 'face' of the various parties in the intellectual conversation, specifically identifying the need, particularly for more senior members, to appear intellectually competent, while at the same time not appearing to be trying to be seen as too smart. This viewpoint suggests that a discussant needs to be sensitive to the face and status level of the presenter and therefore should ask questions in a more polite, supportive and gentle way for more junior colleagues. In this way, they would demonstrate "a commitment to community and a concern to not threaten another's face" [ibid., p.308]. At the same time, gentle questioning might also demonstrate an awareness that the paper presenter cannot cope, intellectually, with difficult questions. On the other hand, Tracy and Baratz [1993] note that by asking challenging questions, one not only enhances one's own face and the impressions that others have of one's intellectual competence, but also provides the paper presenter with the opportunity to display his/her own competence and so develop his/her face.

FACE IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

This discussion of face would be incomplete without reference to the social psychology of face in the Chinese context, given the salience it has for Chinese people as a mediating force in social interactions [Redding and Ng, 1982]. Redding and Ng [ibid., p.203] note "that there is a need for human interaction to be conducted comfortably and hence human beings develop social behaviours in which the joint responsibility for this comfortable interaction is expressed". These social behaviours include the "maintenance of one's own composure" and the avoidance of causing "embarrassment either to oneself or others" [ibid.]. The Chinese concept of face is

described as being bi-dimensional, with the concepts of 'lihn' (臉) and 'mihn-tsz'[1] (面子) [cf. Ho, 1976; Gao et al. 1996]. According to Hu [1944], lihn "is good moral character. It carries with it the idea of being 'a decent human being'". By way of contrast, mihn-tsz "as well as meaning the face physiologically, carries with it the idea of reputation based on one's efforts. It is useful but not essential to life". It is this latter aspect of face that Tracy and Baratz [1993] are primarily referring to when they write about the development and maintenance of intellectual competence. Nevertheless, asking deliberately 'nasty' questions [cf. Hamermesh, 1993] might lead to queries about the moral character (lihn) of the questioner. While 'face' is often viewed as a concept that is particularly salient in the Chinese, or more broadly Oriental, culture, it clearly has parallels in the non-Chinese world as well.

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

From this literature review, it is clear that views differ as to the responsibilities of a discussant. The literature suggests that discussants need to be sensitive to the face of the presenter, and at the same time aware of status differences, to ensure that questions are asked appropriately. Certainly, the discussant must engage in a difficult balancing act among the various stakeholders.

III. NEW DIRECTIONS FOR DISCUSSANTS – AND THE AUDIENCE

To address the various responsibilities and concerns that pertain to the discussant, two new approaches for discussants - and the audience – are presented:

- Group Support Systems, which makes extensive use of technology. The technology may, in itself, limit the extent to which it can be deployed.

- Conversational Learning, which is not technology dependent, although it could be facilitated with technology. It involves a new approach to the stimulation of and engagement in intellectual discussion.

GROUP SUPPORT SYSTEMS (GSS)

Weick [1999] refers to the idea of asking the audience for leads on issues that are pertinent to the discussion of a paper. Weick also notes that he is never concerned about how to engage the audience in a session – "they'll wade in the moment they are given the chance". In fact, part of the problem with discussants is that they take up too much time and the audience may be left with none at all. In this respect, using a Group Support System (GSS) to facilitate audience interaction – with the presenter, the discussant, and itself – can open up new opportunities. Davison and Briggs [2000] describe how they deployed a GSS in the 29th and 30th meetings of the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS). As they describe in their introduction [ibid., p.91] "Imagine a presentation where the entire audience jumped into a lively debate as soon as the presentation began. Imagine that the presenter continued unconcerned, that everybody heard the presentation without losing the thread of the discussion in the audience. Imagine that the participants could report the discussions months later with complete accuracy". They then go on to describe how they lived up to these promises. The HICSS conference does not use discussants, but each session is chaired by a facilitator who has the responsibility of leading the questioning process. These facilitators were able to make use of the comments contributed by the audience, selecting key questions as a way to stimulate discussion on particular topics. A facilitator might not want to use all these comments, but they would be available nonetheless and might in any case stimulate other members of the audience. Figures A-1 and A-2 in the Appendix show two such rooms, one deployed at the British Commonwealth Secretariat in Malta in October 1995 and the other at HICSS 30.

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[1] The words lihn and mihn-tsz are romanised according to the Cantonese dialect of Chinese. In Mandarin/Putonghua, they would be rendered as lian and mian-zi, respectively. The characters in the text are for Traditional Chinese.

A GSS is a suite of software tools for focusing and structuring group deliberation, while reducing the cognitive costs of communication and information access among teams making a joint cognitive effort towards a goal. GSS participants simultaneously type their contributions into a network of computers (see Davison and Briggs [2000] for diagrams of their room/computer layouts). The software immediately makes all contributions available to the other participants. If the team feels it appropriate, the GSS allows for anonymous input. In the context of a conference session, structured brainstorming tools will be most appropriate, allowing participants to create and organise their ideas online, whilst sharing them with other participants.

The literature on GSS is substantial (see Fjermestad and Hiltz [2001] for a comprehensive review). The advantages of deploying a GSS are relatively well known, including:

- an increase in the available discussion time (available time need not be divided among potential speakers because everyone can contribute at once),

- reduced evaluation apprehension and increased participation (due to anonymity which may reduce concerns about negative repercussions from contributing status threatening, politically incorrect, or overly critical ideas),

- a permanent record of the discussion (all logs can be kept indefinitely),

- improved feedback to presenters (much more detailed comments can be provided than a few members of the audience can contribute in traditional settings).

Potential negative effects, include:

- those associated with the noise of typing,

- the distraction of seeing other people apparently not paying attention to the speaker, and

- some audience members becoming so engrossed in their typing that they lose the thread of the presentation altogether.

Davison and Briggs [2000] surveyed a wide range of conference sessions at two consecutive HICSS meetings, and at a planning meeting of the British Commonwealth Secretariat, to gauge the reactions of audience members to providing this form of technology support. They found that the expected benefits, described above, appeared to be achievable "without undue distraction or digression, and with no discernible loss of value from sessions, presentations or discussions" [ibid., pp. 96-97].

CONVERSATIONAL LEARNING

Baker [2002] writes compellingly about the need to ensure that all stakeholders in a problem situation are engaged in a conversation with one another, in order that they may all benefit from what she terms 'conversational learning'. She refers to Webber [1993, p.28] who, while describing a different context – the new economy – makes the same point:

> "Conversations – not rank, title, or the trappings of power – determine who is literally and figuratively 'in the loop' and who is not".

Baker suggests an urgent need for frequent, quality conversations in organisations and communities. Through such conversations, significant learning can take place.

Conversational learning is not easy to define simply. Its origins can be traced to the experiential learning notion that "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" [Kolb, 1984, p.41]. Serendipity, "the art of making an unsought finding" [Andel, 1994] is also important, given its propensity for incorporating "the astonishing into the ordinary" [Stein, 1994, p.111]. Conversational learning undoubtedly involves attentive listening and receptiveness to serendipity, listening "in the spirit of learning, of being surprised, of being willing to slow down and reflect upon new possibilities" [Baker, 2002]. The discussant who uses a conversational learning approach needs to facilitate the interaction of the audience with the paper and its author, but at the same

time needs to avoid delivering a monologue – an extended set of critical opinions that, while perhaps interesting in themselves, provide little opportunity for the audience to "wade in", as Weick [1999] so endearingly puts it.

Baker's [2002] specific context involves consulting, yet many of the implications of conversational learning apply well to the context of discussants and indeed echo some of the guidelines introduced above. Thus, she suggests that consultants (discussants) need to:

- do their own personal work first;
- prepare the context, space and people so as to build up psychological safety for the different stakeholders;
- share the worldviews of different stakeholders;
- emphasize reflection as an essential part of learning;
- build competence and confidence among people so that they ask questions "that delve below the surface" [ibid.].

At the August 2002 meetings of the Academy of Management, the author of this article acted as a discussant for Baker's [2002] paper. He consciously and deliberately attempted to employ the same conversational learning techniques as described in the paper (which, fortunately, he received several weeks in advance) in his discussion of the paper. He conceived of his role as a facilitator of interactions between the audience and the author and attempted to communicate the essence of his learning to the audience so that they should, through listening, learn and "wade in". Having listened to a number of monologues from discussants at other sessions, he strictly limited his own use of time. Of course the audience did wade in, and off they went.

IV. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the literature reviewed in Section II of this paper, I identified a number of issues that pertain to the activities in which a discussant may engage with the audience. Some of these are described in a cautionary way, i.e. as activities to avoid. For example, the discussant is discouraged from:

- presenting his/her own work;
- taking all the available interaction time, leaving none for the audience;
- only talking to the presenter, not the audience;
- deliberately making nasty comments or destroying the face of the presenter; and
- acting as a reviewer of the paper.

Other issues are described in a positive way, i.e. as activities that are encouraged:

- the identification of shared constructs,
- linked findings and contradictory results;
- the offering of ideas for improvements;
- asking interesting, probing and provocative questions;
- offering opportunities for presenters to enhance their face and demonstrate their intellectual competence.

All of these various issues can contribute to the audience's learning experience in the session and may well improve the quality of interaction. Notwithstanding the usefulness of the issues in isolation, the two new approaches for discussants — Group Support Systems and Conversational learning — may exert an additional significant positive impact.

GSS

From a technical perspective, GSS technology provides the opportunity for many members of the audience to participate simultaneously in an online discussion of the paper, raising questions and suggesting new lines of analysis. It may not be possible for the discussant to refer to all of these in the session, nor indeed for the presenter to address them all immediately, but the online nature of the resource means that the presenter can access them subsequently, and re-establish contact with the contributor. Indeed, people who were not able to attend the session, perhaps due to timetable clashes, can also benefit from these online contributions that can be stored on a website indefinitely. Weick [1999] observes that he never worries about getting an audience involved. But a GSS can help on both scores: the over-active audience that wants to say so much that there isn't the time; the shy audience (or shy members of an audience) who do have things to say, but appreciate the anonymity afforded by a GSS which can protect their face and perhaps perceived lack of intellectual sophistication.

CONVERSATIONAL LEARNING

From the non-technical perspective, conversational learning can be used to transform the learning experience of the audience. Through a deliberate attempt to share differing worldviews and alternative perspectives or results, the discussant can shift the discussion of the paper away from its static position on paper towards the active, provocative dynamics of an intellectual conversation. A discussant's enthusiasm for communication on selected, ideally interesting, topics must be tempered by the need to avoid lapsing into a monologue, especially one that is directed only at the presenter: the discussant needs to engage the audience in a genuine multi-directional conversation. This conversation may take place verbally, or it may in addition be facilitated with a GSS or similar technology. Certainly, it is not hard to imagine that a GSS can be used longitudinally, extending the intellectual discussion beyond the immediate confines of the presentation [cf. Davison and Briggs, 2000], while conversational learning enables learning on specific themes within the temporal confines of the session.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Naturally, each discussant brings a unique perspective and set of skills to the session. I recommend that discussants engage in a critical pre-planning exercise so that they can make optimal use of the limited time available. I also suggest that the tenets of conversational learning may provide discussants with the opportunity to engage the audience rather than merely lecture them. Who knows, the discussant may yet stumble serendipitously on an unsought finding. Whatever the technique used, the more we provoke people to engage critically, constructively and sensitively in intellectual discussion, the more new ideas will emerge.

Editor's Note: This article was received on December 23,2002 and published on January 31, 2003

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following reference list contains the address of World Wide Web pages. Readers who have the ability to access the Web directly from their computer or are reading the paper on the Web, can gain direct access to these references. Readers are warned, however, that

1. these links existed as of the date of publication but are not guaranteed to be working thereafter.

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APPENDIX. GSS ROOMS

Figures A-1 and A-2[2] show two examples of GSS rooms.
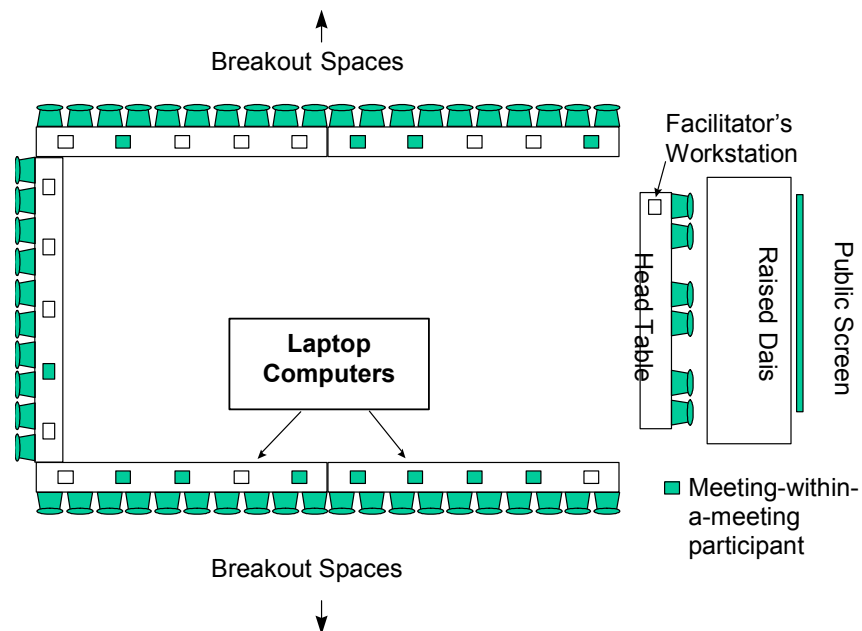
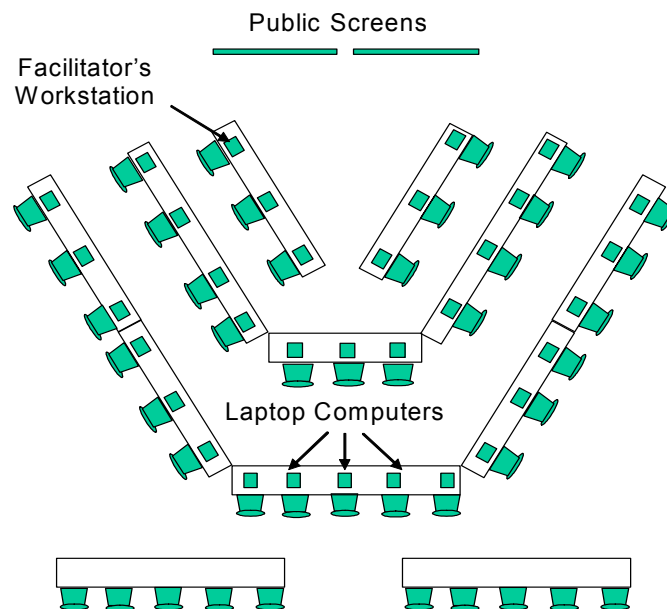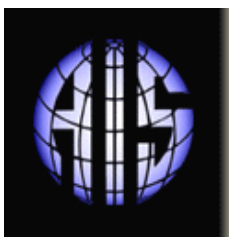Figure A-1. British Commonwealth Secretariat Room Layout

Figure A2. HICSS30 Room Layout

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert M. Davison (isrobert@cityu.edu.hk) received his PhD from the City University of Hong Kong where he is currently an Assistant Professor of Information Systems. His research interests span the academic and business communities, examining the impact of GSS on group decision making and communication, particularly in cross-cultural settings. In recent years, Robert has co-organised minitracks at the Hawaii International Conference on Systems Science on Professional Ethics and Information Technology in Developing Countries. He is currently guest editing special issues of Communications of the ACM (Global Applications of Collaborative Technology) and IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management (Cultural Issues and IT Management). His work appears in the Information Systems Journal, Information and Management, Group Decision and Negotiation, Decision Support Systems, the Communications of AIS and the Communications of the ACM.