Georgia Library Quarterly

4-1-2020

Changing the Habitat at Academic Conferences: Using a Learning Ecosystem with Active Learning During a Panel Presentation

Gail Morton
Mercer University, Macon, GA, morton_gm@mercer.edu

Lee Olson
Mercer University, Macon, GA

Stephanie Miranda
Mercer University, Macon, GA

Adam Griggs
Mercer University, Macon, GA

Kristen Bailey
Mercer University, Macon, GA

See next page for additional authors
Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Information Literacy Commons, Instructional Media Design Commons, and the Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons

Recommended Citation

Changing the Habitat at Academic Conferences: Using a Learning Ecosystem with Active Learning During a Panel Presentation

Authors

Gail Morton, Lee Olson, Stephanie Miranda, Adam Griggs, Kristen Bailey, Christian Pham, and Kathryn Wright

Changing the Habitat at Academic Conferences: Using a Learning Ecosystem with Active Learning During a Panel Presentation

By Gail Morton, Lee Olson, Stephanie Miranda, Adam Griggs, Kristen Bailey, Christian Pham, and Kathryn Wright

Introduction

Active learning is commonly used by teaching faculty and librarians as a method of instruction delivery to facilitate student learning and retention. This technique allows students to participate in the learning process rather than passively listening. Examples of active learning include "writing exercises and reflections, debates and dialogues, role playing, problem-based learning, simulations, and small and large group discussions" (Bonnet et al., 2018, p. 501). In addition to delivery of instruction, an active approach often includes an assessment to determine what the students learned. Fosmire and Macklin (2002) have identified an "active learning wave" that has propelled many of the recent trends in higher education in general and library instruction, noting, "research has shown that students learn better when they actively engage the course content, rather than passively absorb lecture material" (para. 1). Given the popularity of active learning systems among instructional librarians, it is striking how infrequently the strategy is used for conference presentations, the setting in which librarians learn from each other.

The researchers defined their learning ecosystem as the connected learning environment between students, teaching faculty, and librarians (fig.1) that improves and showcases student learning and research. This learning ecosystem is mutually beneficial for all parties involved by promoting academic and
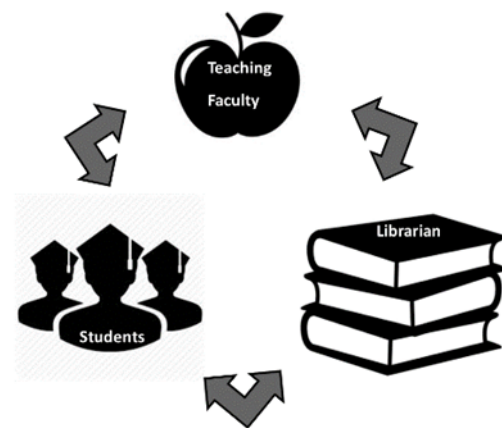
Learning Ecosystem at Mercer University

Figure 1: Handout given to attendees during the GLC panel presentation, Oct. 2019

professional development, encouraging engaged research, and creating extended learning communities.

In order to assess the effectiveness and feasibility of an active learning approach during a panel session at an academic conference, Mercer University librarians presenting at the Georgia Libraries Conference, *Building Better Together*, switched the traditional model for their presentation "Brick House: Building Stronger Academic Connections for Student Learning Success." A traditional structure for a

conference panel presentation allows presenters to deliver prepared remarks, followed by a briefer period of questions and answers. For this panel, the librarians gave a brief overview of their topic and then devoted most of the session to an active learning exercise with the audience. Using two active learning techniques, discussion and brainstorming, the presenters led attendees in a conversation about project ideas involving teaching faculty members, librarians, and students and how this type of learning ecosystem would work, or already works, at their institutions. The librarians participating in the discussion and brainstorming session worked on various library projects, but the model of the learning ecosystem of the projects remained consistent. The Mercer University team of librarians proceeded to assess the use of active learning in the conference presentation.

Literature Review

Many conference goers have noted the shortcomings of the traditional conference presentation model and called for an approach that is more learner centered. For example, Levine (2012) argued that conferences are all focusing on the wrong sorts of things, writing that all the "presentations, videos, talks, can be done before the event, and we can use the bulk [of] the time for the stuff that counts—discussion, debates, conversations" (para. 7). It is to these higher-level activities that we should be devoting the majority of our time at academic conferences.

One common suggestion for moving past the traditional conference format has been to flip the conference as an instructor would a classroom. Watters (2012), in her blog entry "Inside Higher Education, Flipping the Conference," echoes Levine when she wrote, "why do we sit and listen to lectures and panels when what we want most out of our time together is, well, time together?" (para. 1). Watters suggested to send out prerecorded

presentations before the conference so that "when we are all in the room together, we can talk and build and share, rather than just sit and listen" (para. 9). Rom (2015) also argued that viewing panels and presentations prior to the conference is necessary, writing that "if we are to remain an innovative profession, it is incumbent on us to embrace technologies that can enhance teaching and learning" (p. 336). Rom provided various "degrees" of change that can help improve the conference format; these range from having all presentations fully pre-recorded and pre-viewed (fully flipped), to showing a video presentation in the conference, to having attendees read the papers in advance. Going on with business as usual, on the other hand, is referred to by Rom as "The Belly Flop" (p. 335).

Laist (2017), in writing for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, went even further by bluntly arguing not just that "the panel format is broken" but that academic conferences are plain boring. Laist wrote that "rather than inspiration, what I remember most from those sessions is trying to calculate—based on the number of pages the speaker was holding at the lectern—how much longer the droning would continue" (para. 3). Laist went on to recommend many ways to improve conferences, from banning paper readers to incorporating active learning techniques like flipping the conference, using writing exercises, and live-tweeting the presentations.

Much of the discussion around flipping the conference is focused on ways to make conference panels more engaging with the audience. Abrahams and Weinstein (2017) argued that engagement is key and that we should be inviting our audience to be collaborators. They wrote that "audience engagement fosters positive affect, retention of information, and better recall later" (para. 27).

Another important factor in advocating for better conferences has been the rise of the "unconference" which "brings people together

to talk about topics that they declare via a pre-unconference wiki or simply on the day" (Thomson, 2014, para. 6). The idea is that conferences should be personalized and relevant to those attending and attendees should have the opportunity to be collaborators in their own professional development. Importantly, the unconference model has an emphasis on active learning techniques and participatory learning. Overall, there is a strong sense among those involved in higher education that the traditional conference needs to be more balanced between the presenter and the attendees in order to create learner-focused sessions.

Learning Ecosystems

Learning ecosystems become fruitful when we as educators are able to enter the habitat of the learner using active learning techniques. Learning ecosystems, defined a little differently depending on the institution or business, have a common underlying theme:

> To date, our education and training systems have generally focused on the delivery and documentation of formal learning. As a result, we have fostered a society that values the accreditation of formal training and education (think college degrees) and proxy measures of aptitude (time-based promotions) rather than life experiences and direct measures of competence. (Vogel-Walcutt & Schatz, 2019, p. 7)

In the case of a library instruction session, students placed in an active learning environment increase their knowledge of the subject and skills acquired throughout their student lifecycle. Resources needed in this type of learning ecosystem include the class's instructor, one or more librarians, and an active learning assignment or project that is meaningful to the student. The product could be a written paper about an activity that took place in the classroom, something created in

service of an assignment, or a researched topic that will be presented at a student conference. Within this learning ecosystem, teaching faculty are available to provide expertise, help with forming a research question or thesis, or talk to and provide guidance to students about their research topic. For their part, librarians are in an ideal position to teach students information literacy skills as they are preparing their work and throughout their research process, and the product of this research assignment represents the dynamics of student learning and creativity. Kenedy and Monty (2011) suggested that there are "benefits of combining collaborative teaching and information literacy as partnerships between librarians and faculty members […] through the use of a three-stage pedagogical technique we call Dynamic Purposeful Learning (DPL)" (p. 116). They wrote:

> The partnership between the librarian and faculty member starts with the development of the curriculum and the assignment, and continues well past the library session to the mentoring of students throughout the course. To students, help from both the librarian and faculty member was seamless as both were partners in the learning process. (p. 118)

Background

Active learning at an academic presentation begins with the setup of the learning session. Meyers and Jones (1993) identified "four key elements associated with active learning that we all use to create new mental structures: *talking and listening, reading, writing* and *reflecting*" (p. 21). Those elements are the basic building blocks to creating effective active learning activities. Furthermore, the four key elements played a crucial role as we explored the question: can active learning occur in a learning ecosystem during a flipped academic presentation? At our panel presentation, we emphasized all four elements for both presenters and attendees. A moderator gave an

outline of the presentation emphasizing the four elements and then introduced the panel. The presenters, one by one, briefly spoke about a project they were working on, focusing on the learning ecosystem of the project rather than what the project was about, thus establishing a learner focus. In the middle of the presentation, two active learning techniques, discussion and brainstorming, were used to interact with the audience. The presenters left the podium area and positioned themselves closer to the audience, and attendees were invited to share what they were doing at their institutions relating to learning ecosystems. Based on those responses, the presenters offered ways to create a learning habitat at these institutions. At the end of the presentation, attendees were given a survey to find out if an active learning event during a panel presentation at an academic conference is an effective and viable strategy to utilize at a conference.

Librarians at Mercer University recognize the importance of an active learning environment. Mathews et al. (2018) proposed that we "embrace the conflicting notion that although more content is being published and more interactions are occurring online there is an ever-greater need for personalized, face-to-face consultation. We know that just because something is digital, that doesn't mean it is intuitive" (p. 53). Though traditional library-service interactions such as finding research materials, one-on-one research consultations, and citation help are important and well used by patrons, we also recognize that expanding services to include active learning techniques is essential for student achievement in the learning process. Rader (1999) discussed this point:

> Librarians are in a unique position to become partners with faculty in curriculum reform and achieving resource-based learning for students. However, to achieve this new role, librarians will have to break out of their traditional reactive mode and become

leaders and innovators in their interaction with faculty. (p. 21)

To communicate and express our commitment to these ideas, we prepared a presentation that not only addressed the topic in terms of content (highlighting relationships formed with faculty, their role in the active learning process, and the results of a learning ecosystem focusing on student learning) but also in terms of modality. Laist (2017) wrote, "panel presentations should be the highlight of the conference circuit, yet they tend to be thought of as the 'vegetables' that attendees must eat in order to deserve the good stuff" (para. 7). He continued with how inadequate panel presentations are and offers ways to make them more thought provoking and to "transform the panel from a dreary snooze-fest into an energizing encounter" (para. 9). Among the seven ideas, all of which resonated, there was one that we chose to utilize: the flipped presentation. Laist wrote, "the important innovation—the flip—is to replace the typical read-through with a discussion of the presenter's arguments" (para. 15).

Laist is not the only one who sought new ways of presenting at conferences. Rom (2015) has called "for an almost total transformation of the conventional conference into the 'customized conference.' It is, admittedly, a radical proposal--although I believe that there are strong grounds for embracing it" (p. 332). The author continues with the idea of flipping the entire conference, videotaping presentations and providing attendees with the papers to read before the actual presentation is presented. Since we were only involved in flipping our one presentation, we took his idea of a customized conference and turned it into a customized panel of active learning. Additionally, as our discussion is about the learning ecosystem for student learning achievement, we applied this process to our panel attendees. Hurt (2010) suggested a list of techniques that "encourage maximum learning, participation and retention [...] including the Jigsaw Grouping

Brainstorming" which resounded with our group. Hurt (2010) suggested:

> The attendees are divided into separate groups each with a pre-established, topic, facilitator and flip chart. The participants brainstorm the topic of their group while someone keeps notes on a flip chart. After a prearranged time, members of the group separate and go to other tables where that table's topic is discussed and the flip chart shared. The facilitator at each table helps start the brainstorming where the previous group ended. At the end, all charts are shared with the attendees. (para. 14)

Method

We used the Jigsaw Grouping Brainstorming model to create the active learning strategy for our library conference panel. The moderator announced to all participants, eight in attendance, what we were going to do in the presentation, gave a handout of what a learning ecosystem looked like at Mercer University, then introduced the panelists. Each panelist spoke very briefly about the project they worked on, emphasizing their successful learning ecosystem. A PowerPoint presentation played in the background as each panelist stood up to speak, connecting the project to the panelist. The moderator then invited all of the panelists to change their physical position to one that was closer to the attendees, and two librarians were designated as facilitators to guide the group using two active learning techniques, discussion and brainstorming, to explore the question: what are the best practices for facilitating learning ecosystems in higher academia or at your institution? Two other panelists were designated as note takers during the session. At the end of the presentation, another panel librarian was responsible for the survey distribution.

The six-question survey contained a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions [Appendix]. The note takers used a similar mixture of methods.

Survey results

    A.   Quantitative data

All attendees had earned the Masters in Library and Information Science (MLIS). One participant
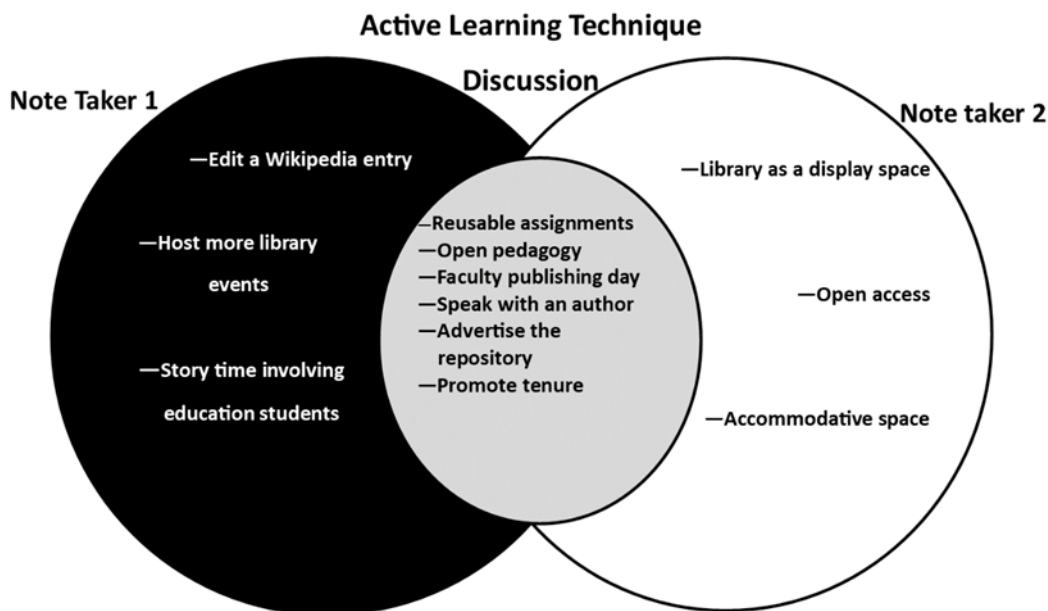

Active Learning Technique
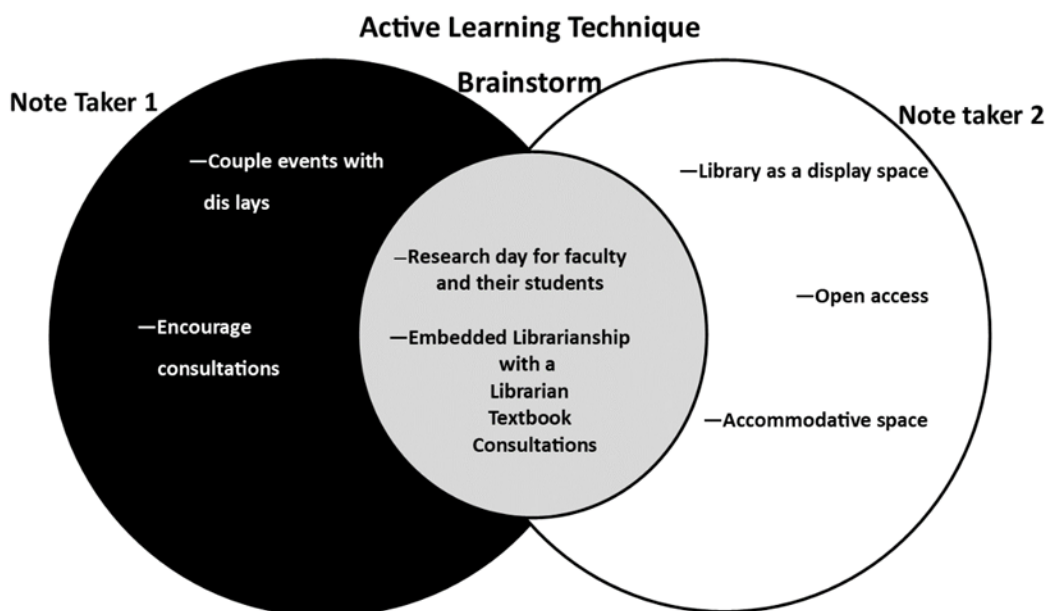
Figure 3: Active learning technique: Brainstorm

had both an MLIS and another graduate degree. Five participants had five to fifteen years librarian experience, two had fifteen plus years of experience, and one had one to five years of experience. In response to the question, "how many panel presentations have you attended in your career?" all attendees reported "more than three." For the last quantifiable question in the survey, seven out of eight reported that they would apply what they learned at this active learning panel presentation. The eighth person responded with "maybe, have some ideas now."

B. Qualitative data

The last question on the survey was an open-ended question: "What would you change about this presentation?" The answers were favorable
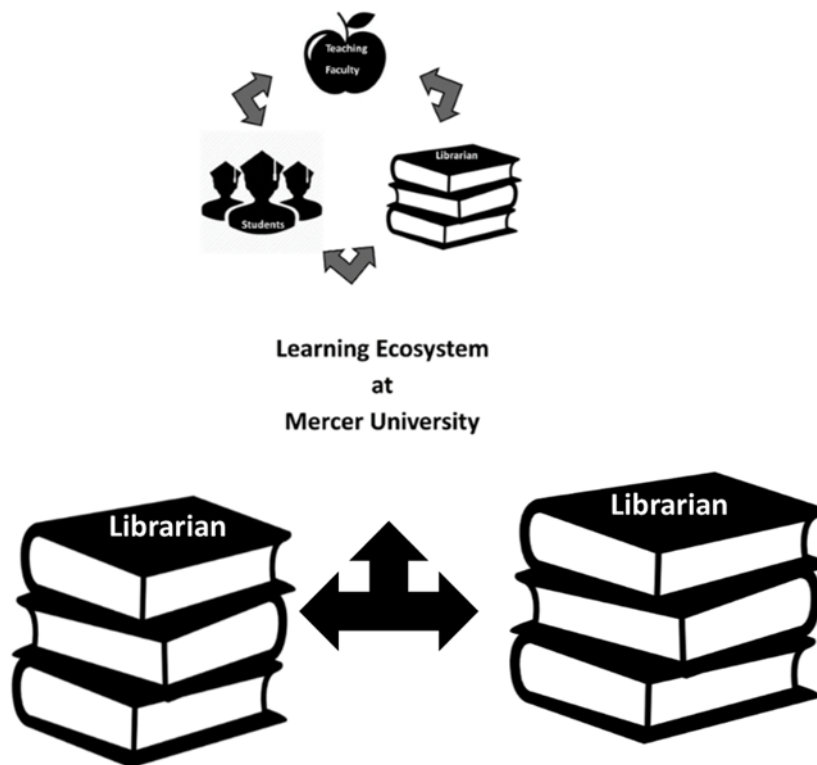

Figure 3: Learning ecosystem created during panel presentation

with comments such as, "it was great, and I wouldn't change a thing." A few of the comments included feedback like the interaction/discussion was great, try and incorporate public libraries, the variety made it interesting, and explain how programs were started. A large part of the qualitative data came from the note takers.

The responses to the question "what are the best practices for facilitating learning ecosystems in higher academia or at your institution?" were involved and meaningful. The outcome of this learning event is represented by two Venn diagrams (figure 2 & 3), one using the results from the discussion technique and the other from the brainstorming technique.

Both note takers are reference and instruction librarians. One specializes in the humanities and the other in the sciences. The discussion technique produced more feedback than the brainstorm technique. This was expected, as less time was spent on the brainstorming session. Fifteen minutes were dedicated to discussion and ten minutes to brainstorming. The presentation created its own learning ecosystem residing in the habitat of the librarians' environment presented in figure 4.

Conclusion

Mercer University librarians presenting at the 2019 Georgia Libraries Conference switched the traditional panel presentation model to encourage active learning. They created a more conversational environment by moving closer to attendees, engaging attendees in a discussion to learn what they are doing at their institutions, and ending with a brainstorming session. A subsequent assessment survey suggested that this approach is feasible and effective at fostering a more productive and collaborative environment. Attendees were open to the idea of presenting this way, and the habitat created was one in which all participants, including presenters and attendees, learned. While these results were encouraging, the number of responses was insufficient to draw a conclusion. It is recommended that this technique be used at future conferences to allow for a larger data pool.

Gail Morton is Research Services Librarian at Mercer University

Lee Olson is Head of Research Services at Mercer University

Stephanie Miranda is Research Services Librarian at Mercer University

Adam Griggs is Research Services Librarian at Mercer University

Kristen Bailey is Research Services Librarian at Mercer University

Christian Pham is Systems Librarian at Mercer University

Kathryn Wright is Archivist at Mercer University

References

Abrahams, M. & Weinstein, L. (2017, April 26). *Make your next panel discussion more compelling. Success depends on strong preparation, concrete examples, and good connection with your audience.* Stanford Business: Career & Success. https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/make-your-next-panel-discussion-more-compelling

Bonnet, J., Herakova, L., & McAlexander, B. (2018). Play on? Comparing active learning techniques for information literacy instruction in the public speaking course. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *44*(4), 500–510. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2018.04.014

Fosmire, M., & Macklin, A. (2002). Riding the active learning wave: Problem-based learning as a catalyst for creating faculty-librarian instructional partnerships. *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship, 34*. http://dx.doi.org/10.5062/F4C53HTB

Hurt, J. (2010, April 14). Stomaching long conference lectures is out! Active attendee participation is in! *Velvet Chainsaw Consulting*. https://velvetchainsaw.com/2010/04/14/stomaching-long-conference-lectures-is-out-active-attendee-participation-is-in/

Kenedy, R., & Monty, V. (2011). Faculty-librarian collaboration and the development of critical skills through dynamic purposeful learning. *Libri: International Journal of Libraries and Information Services*, *61*(2), 116–124. https://doi.org/10.1515/libr.2011.010

Laist, R. (2017, December 15). Academic Conference Panels Are Boring. *Chronicle of Higher Education.* https://www.chronicle.com/article/Academic-Conference-Panels-Are/241970

Levine, A. (2012, March. 8). We can flip more than classrooms. *CogDogBlog*. https://cogdogblog.com/2012/03/flip-more-than-classrooms/

Mathews, B., Metko, S., & Tomlin, P. (2018). Empowerment, experimentation, engagement: Embracing partnership models in libraries. *Educause Review*, *53*(3), 52–53. https://er.educause.edu/-/media/files/articles/2018/5/er183107.pdf

Meyers, C., & Jones, T. (1993). *Promoting active learning: Strategies for the college classroom*. Jossey-Bass.

Rader, H. B. (1999). Faculty-Librarian collaboration in building the curriculum for the millennium: The US experience. *IFLA Journal*, *25*(4), 209. https://doi.org/10.1177/034003529902500402

Rom, M. C. (2015). Reinventing the scholarly conference: Videotape the presentations, flip the panels. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 48*(2), 332–336. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096514002285

Thomson, P. (2014, September 22). Conference blog-let's flip the format! *Patter*. https://patthomson.net/2014/09/22/conference-blog-flipping-the-format/

Vogel-Walcutt, J., & Schatz, S. (2019). *Modernizing learning: building the future learning ecosystem*. U.S. Government Publishing Office. https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo118987/9780160950926.pdf

Watters, A. (2012, March 15). Flipping the conference. *Inside Higher ED*. https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/hack-higher-education/flipping-conference

Appendix

Survey Questions

1. What is your degree? Select all that apply.
   a. MLIS
   b. Other Graduate Level Degree (Masters or Ph.D.), Subject? _____
   c. Current Student
   d. Other _____

2. How long have you worked in a library?
   a. >1 year
   b. 1-5 years
   c. 5-15 years
   d. 15+ years
   e. Never

3. How many panel presentations have you attended in your career?
   a. 0
   b. 1
   c. 2
   d. 3
   e. More _____

4. Do you think you have learned anything during the presentation? Yes or No

5. Will you apply what you have learned at the active learning panel presentation? Yes or No

6. What would you change about this presentation?