

A Learning Centred Conference: All's Well that Ends Well

by Jeanette Romkema

After a plenary or panel session at a conference, it is helpful to protect time at the end to engage the audience with the content just presented. One idea for doing this is to pose a question for people to reflect on or discuss with others around them (or at their table):

- *“What key ideas were offered in this presentation that you feel are worth trying?”*
- *“What did you hear from [the speaker] that resonates with your own experience? What was new for you?”*
- *“What ideas were offered here today that you find most challenging?”*

Another idea to help engagement and personalize the content is to invite personal reflection:

- *“On your own, what one idea do you want to share with your team? Write this in your conference booklet.”*
- *“Take a few minutes on your own to write one key learning from this session that you want to take back to your work with you. What is it, who do you want to share this with, and when.”*

Although this engagement time is often short, even 5 minutes is time well spent. Whether you frame it as a “take away” or “key for me” or “now what”, facilitating it well is important. Here are a few tips:

1. **Be simple and clear.** Since time is limited there is no room for complex instructions. Projecting the task on a screen at the front is helpful and recommended. This way no one is wondering what was just asked.

For example: *“We just heard [the speaker] offer us much food for thought. Now we are going to take some time to consider what was most important for each of us. At your tables, share what was most important for you, your team or your organization to hear today, and why that is so.”*

2. **Set the task and get out of the way.** There is no need for discussion or explanation. Once the task is set, let the participants start the dialogue. Your voice has to stop, in order for theirs to start.

3. **State the allotted time.** People need to know how much time they have. If they hear they only have 5 minutes, they may start their discussion a bit faster than if they think they have an unlimited amount of time.

For example: *“In groups of 2 or 3, take 10 minutes to...”*

4. **Encourage digging deep.** The audience has just been passively listening to a presentation and may need a bit of encouragement to get started and engage authentically in small groups.

For example: *“... as you discuss this at your table, think of the communities in which you work. What is critical for them in light of what you heard today?”*

5. **Affirm the group.** After everyone engages with the task you asked them to do, thank them. They have just shared their thoughts, questions and sometimes tough issues – this should not be taken for granted.

For example: *“Thank you for sharing all you did and for the tough questions and stories you shared. Although we don’t have time to hear the dialogue that happens at your tables, I invite you to continue these conversations over lunch and during the breaks.”*