

A Learning-Centered Conference: The Panel Presentations

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Almost all conferences have time designated for panel presentations: a time when multiple experts come to talk about a specific topic, challenge or set of questions. This group usually sits at the front on a stage or platform and individual panelists then takes turns sharing their thoughts, research and concerns, while the rest of the room listens. In the best of circumstances there is a moderator, but almost always it is a uni-directional information dump. So how can we increase learning during these otherwise passive sessions?

Here are a few ideas:

1. **Limit the time and size of panel.** Plan on a 60-90 minute panel presentation with 4-5 panelists, plus a moderator. You can assume one panelist will most likely drop out at the last minute and then you still have four people for your panel. In general, 60 minutes is plenty of time to sit and listen. However, depending on how you decide to engage the learners before, during or after the panel presentation, 90 minutes may be more appropriate. Remember, this is about maximizing learning.
2. **Create a warm and inviting space.** Don't fall for the common hotel set-up of a long covered table with chair behind it and a podium off to the side – let's minimize the distance (visual and physical) between the panel and the audience. Get rid of the table (so the panelists are not hidden), arrange the chairs in a semi-circle (so the panelists can see each other), add low small tables in front of them (for glasses of water, pens and personal notes), and put the moderator in the middle (yes, they are a key part of the panel learning experience and can sit with everyone else). The audience can now better watch body language and will feel closer to the panel. To warm it up even more, give the panel comfortable chairs, add some flowers and color to the front of the stage, get rid of all extra furniture at the front, and encourage the audience to sit as close as possible (they may need an extra nudge). To help learner engagement the room set-up is important. So, check it out in advance and plan what you need.
3. **Give all panelists a microphone.** Energy can be impacted when there are long stretches of "dead air" while a microphone is passed back and forth between panelists. Clip on, hand-held or stationary adjustable microphones can ensure smooth transitions as well as allow for more spontaneous sharing and interjecting by panelists.
4. **Select and prepare your moderator carefully.** Creating a list of criteria for the people you want on the panel is a great start. Besides content expertise, other criteria to consider may include: gender, cultural background, age, point of view on the topic and worldview. Diversity on your panel will offer richer content and dialogue, and have people checking their assumptions.

Once a moderator has signed on, it is a good idea to send a confirmation email thanking them for agreeing to be part of the event. In this message include the date, time, and location of the event and the panel they are part of. You can then also ask for a bio for the conference program, what dates they would need a hotel reservation for, and any special needs or concerns they have that you should know about i.e. dietary, physical.

The second communication should be from the event coordinator and should be two to three weeks before the event. At this time you should tell them more about the topic and theme of the panel, who the panelist are, and what you hope to achieve. At this time it is important to also explain their role and expectations. This list can be adapted and/or shared with the moderator as is, if this is helpful.

5. **Use visuals.** This is not to say that panelists should bring their own PowerPoint slides – no, there is usually enough of this in the conference breakout sessions and adds a level of complication that is unnecessary. However, showing *one* PowerPoint slide of the panel topics and people’s names or the three questions being addressed by the panel, can be helpful.

There are also other visuals that can be helpful: visuals around the room to use to engage the audience after the panel speaks; handouts with a set of visuals or questions to engage with throughout the panel and then use afterward in groups; screens on the side walls to project a close-up of whomever is speaking (especially helpful in large groups). The key: only use what will enhance learning.

6. **Be clear and specific.** Since time is limited and it needs to be shared with multiple individuals and activities, it is critical to be clear and specific in the introduction, during the panel presentations, and in the instructions for engaging with the content at the end.
7. **Engage the audience *before, during and after the event*.** Starting the thinking and dialogue before the event itself can help “prime the pump” and deepen learning. Two ways to do this are: 1) have panelists write a few provocative assertions and share them on the conference website; and 2) share videos, articles or other resources on the conference sight with an overview of the panel topic, the panelists bios and a few provocative questions to respond to. Like making a trip to unfamiliar country, it is helpful to do some research before you go to better enjoy your trip.

Involve the audience in the first five minutes. By asking a few closed questions and getting a show of hands or other visual response, you can help people focus their attention on the topic at hand. It should not take long, but can be helpful.

During the event, it is also important to take time to invite the audience to actively engage with what they hear in the panel presentation. Much has been shared at the

front, diverse views have been offered, and powerful insights have been received – so now what?

A few ideas are: 1) ask, “Take a minute to write in your program 1 thing that you especially challenged by in this panel discussion. Then turn to 1-2 people around you and share what you wrote”; 2) ask, “Take a minute to write 2-3 questions that come to mind because of what you just heard. Then sit with 2-4 other people and share some of these questions. We will take 15 minutes in discussion”; and, 3) ask, “There are four stations around the room representing the four main themes discussed here today. Go to the station you want to talk more about and spend 20 minutes there. Someone will greet you there to help facilitate the dialogue.” Inviting this engagement would most likely be the role of the moderator, and would have to be frame well.

After the event an audience may still wish to continue the dialogue and/or learning. Consider: 1) creating a space on the conference website for this; or 2) ensuring everyone has a complete list of all attendees so they can connect as they wish. Giving an attendees list *at the beginning* of an event allow individual to start noting who they want to connect with and why.

8. **Harvest the data.** Both the information offered by the panel discussion and that offered by the audience can be rich and important to collect and share. While the panel is discussing consider these two ways to harvest the data: 1) hire a [graphic facilitator](#) to [visually record ideas](#) and information as they are offered; 2) check out the [Periodic Table of Visualization Methods](#) to see what might work best.
9. **Ask everyone to stick around after.** Even if (dare I say, *especially since*) you have meaningfully engaged learners with the content shared in the panel presentation, more questions remain. For this reasons, ask the moderator and panelists to say an extra 15-30 minutes *after* the session (yes, so they have to book their flights accordingly). Even better, ask them to stay for the next meal or social hour – don’t underestimate the need for further dialogue and personal sharing by/with the audience.
10. **Say thank you.** It is critical to do this for the panelists and the moderator, and cannot be overemphasized. Often a small gift is given or a hand-written card or note. What is even better is the sharing of the some of the feedback received about their panel session – nothing says it better than the words of the audience. Be authentic and remember: this can be a learning event for *them* too.

This is also an opportunity to ask the panelists and moderator for feedback, to add to *your* learning. A few simple questions you can ask in an email are: What was most helpful for you in this panel experience? What suggestions do you have for us the next time we plan a panel such as this? What else would you like to share at this time?