The Peer Conference Alternative

So far in this book I've supplied a steady stream of tantalizing hints and imputed claims about this thing I call a peer conference. In this chapter I'll explain in general terms how peer conferences overcome the deficiencies of traditional conferences that I've previously cataloged. The following three chapters cover peer conference process in more detail.

Definition, assumptions, end goals, and process goals

Let's start with the definition and basic premises of peer conferences.

Definition

A peer conference is a set of process tools used by a group of people with a common interest who want the experience of a conference that's intimate, meaningful, and useful to each person who attends.

Assumptions

We attendees collectively:

- Possess a tremendous variety of experience and expertise;
- Create the conference during the conference;
- Own the conference; and
- Value reflecting as a group on our conference experience.

Each of us:

- Affects what happens at our conference, for ourselves and for others;
- Is responsible for our own conference experience;
- Needs to share why we came and what we want to have happen;
- May have experience or expertise that is valuable to other attendees;
- Has something to learn from other attendees;
- Longs to invest our energy in things that matter; and
- Values reflecting personally on our conference experience.

Sharing our experience, expertise, and stories with our peers feels good.

When the right process is provided, the right content and the right way to share it will emerge.

End goals

The primary goal of a peer conference is to create the best possible conference for each individual attendee.

A peer conference maximizes participant interaction and connectedness.

Community-building and future group initiatives are not primary goals of a peer conference; rather, they are welcome potential outcomes.

Process goals

We create the best possible conference for each individual attendee by:

- Creating an environment:
  - where attendees get introduced to one another;
  - where it is safe for attendees to share experience, expertise, and stories;
  - that encourages interaction, despite differences in individuals' experience and expertise;
  - that encourages attendees to stretch and grow; and
  - that encourages and supports fun.
- Providing flexible structure that allows:
  - learning about other attendees;
  - uncovering individual attendee needs;
  - uncovering available experience and expertise; and
  - matching discovered needs with discovered experience and expertise.

- Offering appropriately sized sessions to support conferring as well as presenting.
- Providing facilities, time, a schedule, and facilitation for the sessions that attendees want.
- Holding our conference in enjoyable surroundings.
- Providing supported opportunities for individual and group reflection, introspection, and looking forward.
- Supporting group growth and the appropriate creation of new activities and events.

A peer conference provides just the right amount of process, structure, and support, and then gets out of the way.

What subject and how long?

Here are some broad answers to basic questions about the scope of peer conferences.

A peer conference can be about anything—a specific subject, a broad topic, an issue—that captures the interest of a group of people. Many peer conferences focus on professional themes, but peer conference process works just as well with community-based issues or personal interests. Here are a few examples of peer conference topics:

- Municipality facilities maintenance
- Building sustainability in our community
- Beer brewing
- Pharmacy management
- Providing childcare services
- Credit counseling using volunteers
- Amateur photography
- Working to reduce discrimination and prejudice in *XYZ* county

While some go to traditional conferences because it's expected of them or required, peer conferences are for people with a personal interest in the conference topic. Peer conference process encourages and supports engagement, guiding formerly passive attendees into active participation. As with any conference, an attendee who is disengaged or distracted may receive little benefit from the event, but a peer conference has a much higher likelihood of capturing the interest of even the most jaded conferee.

Peer conferences are small by traditional standards, with between 20 and 100 attendees. The initial roundtable process is practicable with up to 60 participants per roundtable session. When necessary, two simultaneous roundtables can be used without significantly impacting the intimacy and interactivity that exists at the center of a successful peer conference.

Developing the necessary trust, knowledge of other participants, and resulting connectedness, as well as supplying adequate opportunities for introspection and reflection at a conference takes time. Although I have held peer conferences in a single day, such events invariably feel rushed. Using a schedule that starts in the afternoon and lasts at least until the end of the following day provides the right amount of time for a short conference. At the upper end, peer conferences can run as long as three and a half days, providing ample time for attendees to explore multiple issues around the central topic.

An introduction to peer conference process

While peer conference process is certainly not infallible, I've found it offers a much better chance than a traditional conference of turning a conference *attendee* into a conference *participant*. Here's the big picture.

Think of a peer conference as a process, not an event—the *how* of a peer conference generates the *what*. Out of the process comes relevant learning, meaningful connections and interactions, and, sometimes, the creation or strengthening of a community.

A peer conference is a way for people to connect with each other around a common topic, face to face, in ways that are maximally useful and meaningful for each person. Peer conference process facilitates participants' connections by providing a supportive framework in which they can occur, leaving the nature and details of the connections to the people involved.

Providing a supportive framework without encroaching on the specifics of the interactions is important because people have such a wide variety of reasons for wanting connection. They may want to:

- Learn
- Meet other people who share their interests
- Get answers to questions
- Share useful or important information with others
- Build a community of people with whom they have something in common
- Build community around social or political action
- Grow
- Have fun
- Reflect on what they have learned and shared

By focusing on process that facilitates these reasons for connections, rather than a prescribed set of content-driven sessions, peer conferences free participants to ask for and get what they want from the event.

Peer conference process components

Peer conference process is divided into three phases, which I've imaginatively labeled "*Beginnings*," "*Middles*," and "*Endings.*"

Beginnings

The beginnings of a peer conference are rooted in its opening session, the roundtable, which early on establishes a common framework for a safe and intimate conference environment, and then provides equal time for each attendee in turn to share his answers to three questions: how he came to the conference, what he wants to have happen during the event, and what experience or expertise he has that others might find useful.

Feeling safe is a prerequisite for attendees to be open to intimate sharing and making connections. So a peer conference starts by supplying a set of ground rules that define a supportive and safe environment. After these rules are explained, attendees commit to them, establishing a secure and comfortable environment for what is to come.

The roundtable is the only time when each attendee is asked and expected to share publicly. Roundtable sharing sets up the necessary conditions for subsequent interactions and connections between participants, and is important for many reasons. It makes a clean break with the convention that at conferences most people listen and few speak, setting up an alternative paradigm for the rest of the conference. It gives everyone the experience of speaking to the group, allowing people who might rarely or never open their mouths discover that it's not as bad as they feared (hey, they think, at least *everyone* has to share). It provides participants with the rich stew of ideas, themes, desires, and questions that is bubbling in peoples' minds. And it exposes the collective resources of the group—the expertise and experience that may be brought to bear on the concerns and issues that have been expressed.

As you might expect, during the sharing at a roundtable, participants pick up a great deal of useful information about other attendees, as well as the range and intensity of topics and questions on peoples' minds. What is less obvious is what happens as attendees experience and practice sharing while supported by the framework of the conference ground rules—the intimacy, respect, comfort, and excitement that develops as they begin to make meaningful connections with the people they are with.

Middles

Most of the time that attendees are together is spent in the Middles of a peer conference. The Middles include a set of short processes that turn the information and connections gleaned from the roundtable into a schedule of appropriate conference sessions, which are followed by the sessions themselves.

Peer conferences use a publish-and-filter model to determine conference sessions. First, attendees suggest session topics, posting them on blank sign-up sheets displayed in a common area. Second, people sign their names under titles of sessions they are interested in attending. They also indicate whether they could potentially help with a session, perhaps as a facilitator, presenter, or scribe.

Finally, a group of volunteers uses the sign-up sheets to determine the most popular viable topics and the appropriate session form. The chosen sessions are then scheduled, and the resulting conference program circulated to attendees.

Unlike traditional conference sessions, peer conference sessions are informal. Because session topics are determined at the conference, subsequent presentations or panels are nearly always *ad hoc* events. But informal doesn't mean disorganized. To support good process at peer conference sessions, all attendees receive a concise handout that explains how sessions work, and every session is assigned a facilitator.

Endings

Traditional conferences rarely provide useful closure, at best offering a symbolic dinner or a hopeful-incentive-to-stay-to-the-end keynote speaker. In contrast, peer conferences offer two closing sessions that build seamlessly on what happened during the conference.

The *personal introspective* closing session has two parts, the first private, the second public. To start, attendees answer five questions that encourage individual reflection on their conference experience and the development of plans for consequent action. Then, attendees are given the option to share some or all of their realizations and plans with the other attendees. An introspective's personal work fashions a natural bridge between attendees' conference experiences and their post-conference life and work, while the subsequent public sharing further enriches and deepens group bonds.

The second closing section, the *group spective*, gives participants an opportunity to discuss the conference and explore appropriate options for future group activities. Because every group of people has unique needs, desires, and energy, group spectives vary between events more than any other peer conference session, requiring careful facilitation using a toolbox of group process techniques described in detail in Part III of this book. Group spectives offer participants the chance to create their own collective future, extending the reach of the conference beyond the moment when people leave.

Unlike the close of a traditional conference, these two sessions provide support for building a coherent transition from the formal end of the peer conference to individual and collective future actions and events.

Graduate student story

I've been a teacher at various times in my life, including a 10-year spell teaching college-level computer science. I've never had any teacher training. I was a poor teacher when I started; I've gotten better over the years, though there's still plenty of room for improvement.

Conferences are one of the principal conduits for adult continuing education and learning. I'm talking about teaching in this chapter because, not surprisingly, there's significant carryover between the way we've been taught in school and the way we expect to receive knowledge at traditional conferences.

Sitting on a bookshelf in my office is a large blue cloth hardcover book. I wrote every word in it, and painstakingly hand-lettered every mathematical equation it contains with a Rapidograph pen. On the basis of this book, and a two-hour thesis defense, at the age of 25 I was considered fit to be awarded a Ph.D. in elementary particle physics.

I have a confession to make.

When I wrote that book I didn't understand everything I wrote.

How did this happen?

During my first two years as a postgraduate student I attended various particle physics courses. These classes were small, with fewer than 10 students, even though they included graduates from several London universities. Because I had transferred from another school, I didn't know any of the other students, and didn't socialize with them much. We sat in tiny classrooms, while a harried professor took us through what we were supposed to know in order to be awarded an advanced degree.

We've all had the experience of listening to a teacher in class and not understanding something he has said. Perhaps the teacher asks if there are any questions. At the moment you have to decide—do you admit that you're lost and ask the teacher to explain again, or do you say nothing? If you say nothing, is it because you are convinced that you will never understand what is going on, or are you hoping that all will become clear shortly, when the lesson continues?

In those days it was rare for me to give up on anything I was being taught. On the other hand, I was reluctant to display my apparent ignorance when I couldn't understand something during a class. In my experience, I would either "get it" later on, or nobody would understand and the teacher would eventually discover this and assume he hadn't been clear himself. For over 20 years this approach had worked for me. But toward the end of my second year I was understanding less and less of a mathematics course I was

taking. The professor seemed to be going through the motions—he asked few questions, and there was no homework. Elementary particle physicists are either mathematicians or experimentalists, and I was the latter, working on a large-scale neutrino experiment at CERN, the European laboratory for particle physics, so my lack of mathematical understanding was not affecting my research work. But the experience was disconcerting. And, as the semester went on, the percentage of class material I understood gradually declined.

One day, our teacher announced that we would be studying Green's Functions, a technique used to solve certain kinds of equations. After the first 20 minutes of the class I realized that I understood nothing of what was being said, and that I was at a crucial turning point. If I kept quiet, it would be too late to claim ignorance later, and it was likely I would not understand anything taught for the remainder of the semester. If I spoke up, however, I was likely to display my weak comprehension of everything that had been covered so far.

Looking around, I noticed that the other students seemed to be having a similar experience. Everyone looked worried. No one said a word.

The class ended and the professor left. I plucked up my courage and asked my classmates if they were having trouble. We quickly discovered, to our general relief, that none of us understood the class. What should we do? Somehow, without much discussion, we decided to say nothing to the teacher.

The class only ran a few more weeks, and the remaining time became a pro forma *ritual. Did our teacher know he had lost us? I think he probably did. I think he remained quiet for his own reasons, perhaps uncaring about his success at educating us, perhaps ashamed that he had lost us.*

When I didn't speak up, I chose to enter a world where I hid my lack of understanding from others, a world where I was faking it.

For the next two years I analyzed experimental results and compared our findings with theoretical physicists' predictions. I understood the experiments, but not all the mathematics. And that's why I didn't understand some of those laboriously scribed equations in my thesis.

This confession of mine doesn't affect the scientific significance of the work I did. The mathematicians who supplied me the equations understood them, and I was comparing their predictions to experimental results that I understood. What is significant is that I chose to sit through meaningless classes rather than admitting my ignorance. That

mathematics course failed to provide me with a workable learning environment, not because it didn't contain useful content, but because its structure and context made it easier and safer for me to be silent.

Probably you've had a similar experience; a sinking feeling as you realize that you don't understand something that you're apparently expected to understand, in a context, perhaps a traditional conference, where nonresponsiveness is the norm. It's a brave soul indeed who will speak out, who is prepared to admit to her classmates, teacher, or conference presenter that she doesn't get what's going on. Did you? Do you?

A community of learners

At a well-planned traditional conference, conference planners invest significant time and effort before the conference attempting to determine who can potentially provide an "above average" contribution on the conference subject. These people are asked to be presenters and panelists. Everyone else who attends becomes the audience. By the time the conference starts, this distinction between the knowledge "haves" and the "have-nots" has been locked into the conference program.

In contrast, peer conferences make no such *a priori* assumptions about who is a teacher and who is a learner. Rather, they promote an environment in which teaching and learning are ever-fluid activities; the teacher at one moment is a learner the next. Sometimes, everyone in an interaction is learning simultaneously as social knowledge is discovered, constructed, and shared.

> "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."
>
> —*Etienne Wenger*

Peer conferences aren't built on the expectation that every attendee will significantly contribute to the event. There are always participants who have much to offer, intermingled with those who, for whatever reason, add little to the communal pool of relevant knowledge and experience. Rather, peer conference process provides the opportunity for anyone to contribute, perhaps unexpectedly, but ultimately, usefully.

Peer conferences are tools for what educational theorist Etienne Wenger calls *communities of practice*, as defined by three key elements: a shared domain of interest; a group whose members interact and learn together; and the development of a shared body of practice, knowledge, and resources. Such entities can take many forms: artists who rent a communal space to work

and grow together, programmers linked online for the purpose of creating or improving public domain software, or a group of people with a common professional interest meeting regularly over lunch to swap ideas and experiences.

In my experience, peer conferences are high-quality incubators for communities of practice—they provide a wonderful way for a group of people to explore the potential for creating an ongoing community. The majority of peer conferences that I have facilitated have turned into regular events, but, even when this does not happen, a conference inevitably leads to new long-term relationships and communal projects of one kind or another. Conversely, communities of practice can use regular peer conferences to effectively explore and deepen their collective learning and intragroup relationships.

An environment for taking risks

Think of the last time you were with a group of people and made a stretch to learn something. Perhaps you admitted you didn't understand something someone said, wondering as you did whether it was obvious to the others present. Perhaps you challenged a viewpoint held by a majority of the people present. Perhaps you proposed a tentative solution to a problem, laying yourself open to potentially making a mistake in front of others. These are all examples of what I call *risky learning*.

Whatever happened, was the learning opportunity greater compared to *safe learning*—the passive absorption of presented information?

> "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."
>
> —*T. S. Eliot. Preface to Transit of Venus: Poems by Harry Crosby. Black Sun Press, 1931*

Traditional conferences discourage risky learning. Who but a supremely confident person (or that rare iconoclast) stands up at the end of a presentation to several hundred people and says they don't understand or disagree with something that was said? Who will ask a controversial question, share a problem, or state a controversial point of view, fearing it may affect their professional status, job prospects, or current employment with others in the audience? People who brave these concerns are more likely to be exhibiting risky behavior than practicing risky learning.

Peer conferences provide a safe and supportive environment for risky learning in several ways.

First, and perhaps most important, is the commitment attendees make at the very beginning of the conference to keep confidential what is shared. This simple communal promise generates a level of group intimacy and revelation seldom experienced at a conventional conference. As a result, participants are comfortable speaking what's on their minds, unencumbered by worries that their sharing may be made public outside the event.

Second, because peer conferences are small, there is an increased chance that attendees will be the sole representatives of their organizations and will feel comfortable fruitfully sharing sensitive personal information to their peers, knowing that what is revealed won't filter back to coworkers. Even when others are present from the same institution, the intimacy of a peer conference usually helps to develop amity and increased understanding between them.

Third, peer conference process makes no presuppositions about who will act in traditional teacher or student roles during the event, leading to fluid roles and learning driven by group and individual desires and abilities to satisfy real attendee needs and wishes. In an environment where it's expected that anyone may be a teacher or learner from moment to moment, participants overcome inhibitions about asking naive questions or sharing controversial opinions.

> "Learning is also a risk-taking business since as we learn we question our past knowledge and even our previous attitudes, beliefs, values and emotions so that teachers need to provide a safe environment for risks to be taken. It is crucial to all adult learners that they feel safe and supported as they launch out into the deep and learn new things."
>
> —*Peter Jarvis. Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: Theory and Practice. Routledge, 2004*

Finally, peer conference facilitators model peer conference behavior. When they don't know the answer to a question they say "I don't know." When they need help they ask for it. When they make mistakes they are accountable rather than defensive. Consistently modeling appropriate conduct fosters a conference environment conducive to engaged, risky learning.

Ultimately, each attendee decides whether to stretch. But peer conferences, by supplying optimum conditions for risky learning, make it easier for participants to learn effectively.

Ask, don't tell

Right before each one of my early peer conferences, the same disturbing thought ran through my mind. What if everyone came expecting a traditional conference program to be given to them, just like every other conference they'd ever attended, and no one volunteered topics they wanted to talk or hear about? I was concerned enough about this embarrassing possibility to ask steering committee members to think of presentations they could give if attendees failed to have any ideas of their own.

After a few years I stopped worrying. No one showed difficulty coming up with a list of topics they'd like to learn about or discuss. In fact, just about everybody seemed to be surprised

and pleased to be asked. And what's more, even when their desires were not fulfilled at the subsequent conference (no, you really can't please everyone), their disappointment was clearly mollified by the information they received about why their coveted session(s) didn't take place.

> "Many times people do not voice their expectations."
>
> —*Virginia Satir et al. The Satir Model. Science and Behavior Books, 1991*

It's not surprising that giving attendees the opportunity to ask for what they want to have happen is an option conspicuously absent from traditional conferences, which have no way to follow up on the suggestions and requests that would be made. Sadly, instead, conference organizers tell attendees what they will be getting. In contrast, a peer conference encourages attendees to share what they want to have happen, and then provides a supportive process that generates appropriate sessions on the popular topics.

In my experience, Virginia Satir was right—people often don't express their expectations. But we needn't make it any harder for them by not even asking what they want.

Rich interpersonal process

Here's what happens interpersonally *officially* at a peer conference: Participants discover and share the interests, needs, and knowledge of each attendee; the conference supplies tools for people to determine via a shared public space what will happen during the conference; attendees generate, staff, and participate in the resulting sessions; and finally, the conference provides group sessions for private and public individual and group reflection and future initiatives.

Imagine what happens *unofficially*!

> "Conversation is king. Content is just something to talk about."
>
> —*Cory Doctorow. boingboing.*

I am fascinated with how much interactive richness evolves out of the right amount of structure. Business visionary David Weinberger, in his thought-provoking book *Everything Is Miscellaneous*, describes Wikipedia as a "pragmatic utopian community that begins with a minimum of structure, out of which emerge social structures as needed." Like Wikipedia, where a majority of edits are done by less than two percent of the contributors, but most of the content is created by unregistered occasional contributors, a peer conference is not pure bottom-up, but contains a mixture of top-down structure, and bottom-up attendee-driven content.

Similarly, too much structure at a conference leads to excessive formality that gets in the way of conversations, while too little structure fails to generate the necessary level of personal information that attendees need to quickly engage in meaningful interactions. I've worked on

observing and tuning this balance at peer conferences for years. Getting the mix right, sustaining it throughout the conference, and ending with sessions that integrate and enrich individual and group understanding creates a rich, productive stew of interaction and discovery that is largely absent from traditional conferences.

Flattening hierarchy

In the previous chapter, I described the benefits of de-emphasizing attendee status at the start of a conference. Following this intent, a peer conference works to flatten perceived and proclaimed hierarchy throughout the event. Ground rules, roundtable process, methods for determining session topics, even the closing sessions formats are all designed to minimize overt and covert preconceptions about whether some attendees are more important than others.

Peer conference ground rules fashion a confidential environment where freedom to ask questions, be they specific or fundamental, is made clear and agreed to by all participants. Confidentiality removes the fear of extra-conference repercussions, making it easier for the unconfident attendee to ask questions. Specifically agreeing that everyone has the freedom to talk about what they want to talk about, including feelings, and that everyone can ask about anything puzzling, lowers self-imposed barriers to bringing up "stupid" questions and topics (which, it frequently turns out, many of the attendees want to ask or discuss).

The roundtable reinforces this initial message. By allocating the same amount of time for each attendee to speak to everyone present, and by having people speak in no particular order, the roundtable implies that everybody's needs, desires, experience, and expertise are important, and that the conference is about learning and sharing, things of which we are all capable, whether newcomers to or 30-year veterans of the conference's subject.

When it comes to suggesting session topics at a peer conference, everyone has an equal opportunity to publish their ideas for all to see. Democratic voting, tempered only by feasibility, drives the selection of sessions. Anyone can volunteer to help analyze the votes and organize and schedule the resulting peer sessions.

Peer conference sessions are rarely large, and are invariably informal, with questions welcomed. Small sessions do much to reduce conversational barriers between attendees with different levels of knowledge and understanding.

Finally, sharing at the personal introspective provides a surprisingly intimate window on attendees' realizations, conclusions, and plans. When, in a single session, a seasoned CEO states that he hasn't been treating his staff well and needs to change his behavior in some areas; an industry veteran announces that the conference has helped her decide to take a whole new direction in her professional life; and a novice communicates his touching new-found

excitement about the conference, attendees are drawn closer and status is the last thing on anyone's mind.

Creating community

Creating community is not a primary goal of peer conferences, but rather a delightful bonus outcome. Peer conferences usually evoke intimate communities-of-the-moment, but they also often lead to the formation of long-term associations. While there's no guarantee that a peer conference will be the initial seed that blossoms into a lasting community, about half of the peer conferences I've facilitated have led to some kind of repeat engagements for a significant percentage of the original group.

Because peer conferences de-emphasize attendee status, the nature of any resulting community is likely to be more inclusive and less cliquish than communities that form around traditional conferences. The peer conference atmosphere permeates attendee interactions outside the conference, making it easier for people to ask other participants for advice and support.

The key to getting important questions asked— answering attendee meta-questions

For a conference to be able to answer attendee questions effectively, attendees must feel comfortable asking questions in the first place. There are a couple of conditions that, if satisfied, will greatly increase the likelihood of this occurring.

First, the conference has to create an environment that encourages attendee questions and supplies ample opportunity for asking them. The opening session of a peer conference, the roundtable, explicitly gives attendees permission to ask any questions they have and offers a safe environment that encourages them to do so.

Second, we can help attendees overcome one of the biggest obstacles to making meaningful connections with others—getting started. To make it easy to strike up conversations with the right people, we can supply attendees with the answers to *meta-questions* about the other participants and the conference environment. Here are some examples of early conference meta-questions:

- Who else is here?
- Who might I be interested in talking to?
- How can I start a conversation with them?
- Who here may be able to answer my questions?
- What are other people interested in talking about?

TABLE 5.1 • Meta-questions and the Corresponding Peer Conference Session(s)

META-QUESTION	PEER CONFERENCE SESSION
Who else is here?	Roundtable
Who might I be interested in talking to?	Roundtable and peer sessions
How can I start a conversation with them?	Roundtable
Who here may be able to answer my questions?	Roundtable and peer sessions
What are other people interested in talking about?	Roundtable and peer session sign-up
Where can I talk about what I want to talk about?	Peer sessions
What have I learned?	Personal introspective
What might I want to change in the future?	Personal introspective
What might we want to do in the future?	Group spective

Unlike traditional conferences, peer conferences offer unique opportunities for attendees to get these questions answered. Table 5.1 lists attendee meta-questions, paired with the peer conference session or sessions that provide corresponding meta-answers.

Answers to these meta-questions give attendees the information they need—the right people to talk to, interests in common, and conversational openers—for asking their specific, topic-related questions during the peer sessions. At every peer conference I've run, attendees have commented on the ease of getting to know the participants they find interesting and rewarding to meet.

Synergy

It's difficult to convey the cumulative effect of the peer conference components. A safe and welcoming environment, introductions to the other attendees, discovering what people want to talk about and what they know about, the ability to create a conference that fits personal needs, and the opportunities to reflect on what happened individually and as a group—the combination of all these factors creates the conditions where wonderful things happen for attendees.

> "They speak only of such a Synergie, or cooperation, as makes men differ from a sensless stock . . ."
>
> *—Peter Heylin. Historia quinqu-articularis. London, 1660*

A peer conference is synergistic; greater than the sum of its parts. In the same way that a good book's plot, characters, and writing draw in and engage readers, a peer conference contains just the right ingredients to draw in and engage attendees. When people are given the permission, tools, and support to fashion a conference that is just right for them, they quickly become immersed in a flow of ideas, learning, and connection that builds on itself, creating not only fruitful personal experience but also an infectious group energy. Such is the power of synergy that permeates a peer conference—my wish for you is that you get to experience it for yourself.

Combining peer and traditional conference sessions

I'm pragmatic, not a purist. Including peer and traditional sessions can combine the best features of both conference models into one event. The trick is to restrict your traditional sessions to presenters and topics that you are confident will be dynamite for your conference.

This requires a willingness to scrutinize proposed conventional presentations or keynotes for excellence, and avoiding any quota for conventional sessions. If you can get a fantastic keynote speaker who can address a hot topic at your conference, book her. If no choices for a keynote excite you, don't have one. Similarly, review proposals for traditional presentations or panels, and don't worry about not having enough fixed sessions. A peer conference will soak up the time available—more time means there's time for another round of peer sessions.

The advantages of this approach are twofold: First, advertising specific speakers and presentations will attract attendees who prefer to know in advance that at least some of the conference program will be of interest, and, second, taking comfort in knowing that the fixed sessions you offer are of high quality and likely to be enjoyed by participants.

Novelty

I have been scared of doing new things for most of my life. When I first started college teaching, I was a nervous wreck, preparing every lesson meticulously for hours. I was scared I would not know the answer to some question, scared that I would get confused and look like an idiot, scared that my students would discover that I didn't know everything about my subject. It took about five years before I started to relax, discovering that I could make mistakes and not know all the answers, and still feel okay about myself.

The same thing happened when I first started facilitating conferences. I was anxious in front of the assembled attendees—would I be able to explain the conference process clearly and facilitate effectively, or would people be baffled and frustrated, and leave?

71

These days I'm relaxed about teaching and conference facilitation. It's not because I have mastered my subject and approach—on the contrary, I learn every time I teach, train, or facilitate. Rather, time has built familiarity with my self-knowledge and self-confidence. I know, more or less, my strengths and weaknesses and am comfortable with them.

But this has taken me years.

When you go to a conference that you haven't attended before, you'll usually feel anxious on arrival. It's normal to feel somewhat awkward or embarrassed to be among a bunch of strangers, some of whom are gaily chatting away with each other while you, knowing no one, wonder how to strike up a conversation. People suppress these feelings at conventional conferences, because they believe they should project a "professional" appearance that avoids the display of emotions considered negative, like fear or anger.

People come to conferences with questions. A traditional conference provides, primarily, a framework for answering attendees' questions about content, the topics covered at the conference. By reading the published conference program, people can get some idea of what topics are, ostensibly, going to be covered. But, as we've seen, attendees have many other kinds of questions, and a traditional conference has no direct means to provide the answers they need.

A peer conference allows novelty, in both structure and content. If attendees want to hold a session with an unusual format—a performance, say, or an impromptu simulation, or a three-hour presentation—then conference organizers will make every effort to "make it so." Creating such a conference schedule is challenging, but the work is made easier by the knowledge that *this is what attendees want*.

The culture of a peer conference embodies flexibility, which in turn makes it easy for attendees to suggest and carry out novel ideas. Sometimes, one year's amusing novelty turns into a quirky and beloved annual tradition—the annual softball game or the midnight swim in the nearest available body of water. I like it when that happens.