EDITORIAL

Peacocks and Jellyfish: Steps and strategies for successful conference chairing

One of the more challenging aspects of the nurse educator’s role is the development of “presence”. Whilst being seen as the key to career progression, a concrete definition of presence is yet to be satisfactorily articulated, making the quest for it somewhat difficult. One thing that most commentators agree upon, however, is the view that acting as the chair person at conferences can contribute towards the achievement of the elusive concept of presence. Although the prospect of chairing a large plenary session or key note address can be quite daunting, conference organisers are usually receptive and very grateful to people who volunteer to chair the small concurrent session which make up the main elements of most conferences.

This can appear to be the perfect opportunity for nurse educators to raise their profile in the national or international arena. However, it must be noted that there is much more to successfully chairing a session than simply introducing the speakers. The role can contain pitfalls for the unwary and, unfortunately, conference delegates tend to remember bad session chairs as clearly as they remember good ones. A simple search of the Internet would suggest that there is very little guidance provided for conference chairs, so many people volunteer unaware of the demands of the role and the menagerie that one is likely to encounter. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the pitfalls and personalities and to suggest some strategies that can be used to address them.

Fundamental duties

The fundamental duties of a chair person may be blindingly obvious. However due to the excitement or stress of the role they may get overlooked. The most basics of them are outlined here.

**Put the speakers at their ease**

Although people who are new to the chairing role have their own fair share of butterflies, it is a fair assumption that one or two of the session presenters will also be feeling the strain. Getting to the session early in order to introduce yourself and to discuss with presenters how they want you to manage time for them goes a long way to helping to start the session with a feeling of being in control, this can be quite comforting for novices, both chairs and presenters.

**Manage session times rigorously**

One of the most important aspects of the chairperson’s role is to ensure that the sessions begin and end on time. This can mean being particularly ruthless regarding both time keeping and question management and also in exercising a degree of self control so you do not get so absorbed in the presentation that you forget to watch the timing. A good way to prevent speaker over-run is to write down the time that the speaker begins and also note down the time he should finish so that you know when time has run out. It can make people feel uncomfortable to interrupt a speaker who is in full spate or to bring a lively discussion to a premature close, but it must be remembered that all of the presenters have an equal right to communicate their work to the group.

There are a number of ways to manage this scenario. One of the most effective ways is to make it...
clear to the speakers exactly how much time they have and also to emphasise that their time allocation include time for questions for the floor. Generally a 30 min conference slot consists of 20 min presentation and 5–10 min for discussion. If the speakers are under the impression, as many often are, that they have the full 30 min for the presentation of their work, an effective chair will negotiate with them to either reduce their presentation slightly or to be available at the end of the session or at refreshment times to talk to anyone with queries about their work. Additionally most presenters put their contact details either in the conference programme or on the final slide of their presentation and the chair can direct participants to this information in order to facilitate debate outside the sessions. Some speakers ask the chair to let them know when they have two minutes left and this also can be a useful way of encouraging the presenter to draw their session to a close.

In extreme cases when a speaker shows no sign of slowing down, there is nothing to worry. The chair must step in politely to bring the session to an end. Some speakers get so enthused about their topic that they are oblivious to the fact that their audience is becoming increasingly restless as their presentation runs over time. It is the fundamental duty of the chair to ensure that this does not happen.

A speaker does not arrive

Most conferences organisers try to ensure that session chairs are fully briefed with regard to speaker attendance. However, occasionally, a speaker is unexpectedly unable to attend and the chair is left to fill the suddenly empty slot. A basic error that novice chairs make is to suggest that the audience disband for refreshments or poster exhibition viewing and reconvene at the appropriate time. This only works if the absent speaker is the last of the session. In all the other cases, the danger of this strategy is that there is no guarantee that the participants will actually return leaving the next speaker to face a severely depleted audience. Likewise a good chair will resist the temptation to invite the following speaker to move his presentation forward into the vacant slot. The problem with this approach is that some delegates choose to move between presentations and will be annoyed if they arrive at the scheduled time only to find that they have missed a paper they particularly wanted to hear because the scheduling was altered by the session chair.

One of the effective ways to deal with this scenario is either to invite previous speakers to take more questions about their work or to participate in a debate with the audience. If the previous speakers have left, the chair may wish to initiate a group discussion around some aspect of the session or conference topic.

The speaker biography is extensive

Most conferences ask speakers to supply a biography which is then passed onto the session chair to help them to introduce each presenter. Generally, experienced presenters tend to provide brief and relevant biographies of three to four lines, inexperienced presenters often provide two to three paragraphs.

If faced with a speaker who has provided a biography that makes War and Peace, look like a small pamphlet, it is perfectly acceptable for the chair to editorialise and précis. Although interesting personal insights can be gained from a complete overview of someone’s entire adult life, the important information for most conference audiences are who is the speaker, what are their areas of interest and where do they work?

The conference menagerie

Within the personalities that attend conference a number of parallels with the animal kingdom can be seen. Some of the more challenging types of delegates who will come within the influence of a good chair person are the following:

The Jellyfish

In her splendid novel 'Bridget Jones' Diary' Helen Fielding describes spending time with one of her characters as like swimming in the sea with a jellyfish: "...all will be going along perfectly pleasantly then suddenly you will get a painful lashing, destroying confidence at a stroke..." (Fielding, 1996, p. 146). An audience member who is a jellyfish will bide their time and then ask a difficult or obscure question that is specifically designed to confound the presenter or even worse may begin to attack the individuals work. Whilst it is reasonable to assume that anyone who has put their work forward for peer review in the public arena should be willing to defend it and enter into a debate with colleagues regarding the merits of that work, it is not productive to allow the debate to become disparaging or hurtful. The motives of this type of delegate are not always clear, but they can be extremely destructive in a poorly regulated session.
A jellyfish attack is one of the most difficult things for a session chair to manage appropriately, particularly, if the jellyfish in question is a revered and well known person in their field. However part of the support that a chair is supposed to provide is to curtail 'discussions' or 'questions' that are designed to upset or threaten the speaker. This is not to advocate that people should be censored, but a good chair will not let these exchanges go on for too long. Jellyfish attacks can completely destroy the confidence of even the most experienced speaker and can, in most extreme cases, effectively end the conference career of novices.

The simplest way to deal with a jellyfish attack is to politely intervene and attempt to draw the destructive exchange to a close. Simply using phrases like "thank you for your contribution which has given us a lot to consider, however I think other people in the audience may wish to ask something" may help to deflect the confrontation. If there are no audience members with a question, use the chair's prerogative and intervene with a friendly question of your own. If the attack has been very severe, then try to make time at the end of the session to speak to the presenter and make sure that he is okay.

The Peacock

In the natural world, the peacock uses its amazing plumage to attract a mate, fanning out its train, strutting about, and shaking its tail feathers. A conference peacock exhibits much the same behaviour though the goal is not the attraction of a mate but the attraction of the attention (and, hopefully, the admiration) of everyone in the room. Unlike a jellyfish who will attack a speaker to expose that speaker's ignorance, a peacock will enter into a debate with a presenter in order to expose their own glory and achievements. Peacocks are easy to recognise since any questions, comments or contribution they make will eventually centre upon their own work, their most recent paper, their imminent conference presentation or their forthcoming book. They are the individuals, who may sit through a thoroughly satisfactory and interesting presentation on pain management in older people, for example only to ask a question such as 'when I did my own work on educational attainment in Lower East Side children under the age of 10 in New York I found.......(long explanation of the Peacock's work)...... did you find anything similar?' Such questions which are merely asked to allow for a complete and full description of a usually unrelated piece of work serve only to highlight the Peacock's achievements and very often leave both speaker and audience confused as to the relevance of the question to the topic which has just been presented. It must be noted that in an example of art not imitating nature, conference peacock behaviour can be found in both sexes.

Although less destructive than the jellyfish, peacocks can, in their own way, be equally disruptive and difficult to manage. Once again an effective chair will have to either try to clarify the relevance of the question (although this can be a dangerous technique since it may give the Peacock more floor time), or tactfully suggest that the debate should be continued outside of the session in order to allow other questions from the audience or from the chair themselves.

The Mute Swan

As a speaker nothing is more disheartening than to reach the end of your carefully crafted presentation only to find that the audience is composed entirely of Mute Swans and there are no questions or comments for you to respond to. In nature, Mute Swans tend to have a characteristic neck sway and this can also be seen in a mute audience as they try to avoid eye contact with the speaker, the chair and with each other. An effective chair person will always ensure that he has a question to ask to break this silence. This can be difficult if you are chairing a session which is not your field and novice chairs are well advised to volunteer for a session which interest them or about which they have some degree of knowledge. However, simply asking for more details about some aspect of the work or seeking clarification about the future direction of the study can be useful strategies and often will spark a reaction from the rest of the group.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to provide an overview of the pitfalls and personalities that are likely to provide a challenge to a conference chair. It must be noted that these are challenges which exercise experienced chairs as much as novices in some instances. Being prepared for them, together with taking time to consider the merits or otherwise of some of the...
proposed strategies for addressing them, may go a long way help making session chairing the enjoyable experience it should be.

Reference