The Question Circle for Improving Presentations and Lectures: A Popular Education Tool

Larry Olds
The Popular Education News (www.popednew.org)

…shifting from podium-centered knowledge distribution to participant-centered knowledge creation

Many people can see that workshops, breakout groups, concurrent sessions can be facilitated in ways that are highly participatory. But what about plenary sessions where there is a highly-acclaimed speaker or panel? **Question Circles** are one answer.

To understand the Question Circle process you must keep in mind the quote above. The purpose of a speaker is not to distribute deposits of knowledge from the front of the room, but to animate knowledge creation among the participants. What happens for the participants is the center. To help this happen, at the end of each 40- or 45-minute speech by a speaker, ask everyone to move their chairs around[1] and form circles of four to seven people to both discuss their reactions as well as to work together to formulate and prioritize questions for the speaker. At the end of 25 or 30 minutes call everyone back. (Larger groups require more time than smaller ones.)

Each group sends their spokesperson to the microphone to ask the group's priority question. The facilitator can either allow 6 to 8 questions and then a response from the speaker or hear all of the priority questions before a response from the speaker. (Our experience so far has been that in spite of being told they didn't need to respond to every question, the speakers felt compelled to do so.) Time constraints will determine how to handle this.

An instruction sheet similar to the following should be handed out at the beginning of each session.

Question Circles: generating questions for the speakers

Purposes: **Everyone gets to speak, be heard, discuss - i.e. to be fully human participants in today's event**
Generate good questions that are of interest to more than an individual

Instructions:
1) Form small groups of 4 - 7 people (Look around you and see that no one is left out.)
2) Share reactions to the speaker being sure everyone gets to speak.
3) Make a list of questions that members of the group have that they would like to ask the speaker, or they think should be asked of the speakers.
4) Clarify and improve the questions.
5) Determine which of the questions are the group's priority questions. Use consensus if possible in choosing the priority questions. Indicate with an * the group's priority questions.
6) Choose a spokesperson to ask the question when it is the group's turn to ask a question.

LIST YOUR QUESTIONS BELOW AND ON THE BACK. MARK THE *PRIORITY QUESTIONS* WITH AN *

The time for questions is short variation

If time for questions at the end of a presentation is short, say 15 or 20 minutes only, rather than immediately beginning a traditional Q and A session, one can ask the participants to form diads (pairs). Each person then gets to formulate a question and share it with the other person in their diad. As little as five minutes is enough to allow everyone to speak, to experience being a fully human subject, and to "prime the question pump" so to speak.

In reflecting on the experience of using these question circles at a number of conference sessions with audiences of 100-400 people there are several things I learned.

- *I felt the process of 6 to 8 questions at a time, then the speaker's response, was better than hearing all of the questions before responding.*
- *Good questions were asked. It is not surprising that a group would hone and improve the questions to make them better than individuals would make their questions. Michael Albert commented that although he has spoken to audiences all over the world, the questions at our conference were the best set of questions he had ever been asked. But what was far more important than the questions was the dialogue in the circles. Remember it is the participants engaging together that is the center of the enterprise. The interactions with the speakers are meant to serve that central task.*
- *The integrity of the process requires the cooperation and participation of the speakers. They must agree not to make themselves available for individuals who break away from the groups for private questions with them.*
- *There are a couple of points to note in assessing this situation and comparing it to a regular Q and A session where self-appointed extroverts ask the questions. 1) Only a few people can ask their question in a regular Q and A session; in a question circle process, everyone's questions are voiced in the circles, 2) All the questions of people in the room are not asked in a typical Q and A; with question circles, many more questions are asked in front of the whole group. It is important in the circle process that all questions are asked even if there is not time for the speaker to respond to them, and that the questions that represent the groups' grappling with the ideas of the session are the center, rather than the central focus being the experts' musings from the front of the room.*
- *I would have been comfortable with only selected questions being responded to, but the speakers were not. This suggests that the speakers' role as experts is well-ingrained in the cultural context of being a conference speaker. It would be better for speakers to adopt an ignorance-based model, in the sense I recently heard advocated by Wes Jackson, that Midwest treasure and curmudgeon of the Land Institute in Kansas. Knowing that the more we study, read, listen, the more experience we get, the more, we learn, we discover the more there is to know. We realize more and more how little we know; we realize how ignorant we actually are. It is presumptuous to assume that one person can answer everything. We therefore need a model of behavior that accepts this ignorance. In the Question Circle process it would be better if speakers responded to what they knew best and left the rest for someone else. Remember the real importance is in the process that forms the questions.*

- *Someone suggested that groups might be allowed to make a one-minute statement rather than ask a question. That I thought was a good idea.*[2]

- *If I did it again I would take care that the microphones were turned toward the audience, not toward the speaker. This would be a symbolic gesture to emphasize that the main focus ought to be on the participants.*

[2] At a speech by Mary Robinson, the former UN Commissioner of Human Rights, an interesting alternative process was put in place I think is worth experimenting with at conferences. At the conclusion of Ms. Robinson's talk members of the audience were invited to make statements on issues important to them – the time limit was one and a half minutes. Microphones faced the audience as the guest speaker listened from behind the speakers. Thirty-seven people spoke with brevity and eloquence before the time ran out. The speaker closed the session with her comments on what she had heard. It was better than the usual Q & A but there were hundreds of us who didn't speak at all, who did not get to participate in an active way. Question circles seek to include everyone in the dialogue.