Research Presentation in a Democratic Society: A Voice From the Audience

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We diligently pursue this year’s conference theme, Research for Education in a Democratic Society,” stated Ann Lieberman (1995, p. 32) in her commentary in the December 1995 issue of Educational Researcher. As was relevant for the 1996 annual meeting of AERA, this theme can, without question, be considered a time invariant factor in educational research. Therefore, I will examine the following question: how can we demonstrate educational research in a democratic society through our annual meeting sessions? I limit the scope of my study to only one aspect of AERA annual meetings: issues related to paper presentation format sessions from the perspective of the audience. This paper identifies some of these issues and offers some suggestions for improvement. Two earlier papers (Huberty & Olejnick, 1992; Renfrow & Impara, 1989) provided some good advice for session organizers (chairs and discussants) and presenters, respectively. This paper covers additional information useful for novices as well as experts, whether they are session organizers or presenters.

Background
This paper is based on data I collected over the last seven years through my participation at AERA annual meetings and takes the form of a trend analysis based on my observational data and field notes. During this period, I stayed the length of the meeting at each venue, attended 126 sessions, and observed 748 participants. The subjects in this study were the active participants of AERA sessions, including presenters, discussants, and session chairs. The size of the population varied from year to year, but the common characteristics of the population remained somewhat stable over the years. There were 4,826 participants at the 1990 annual meeting; this number steadily increased to 7,826 for the 1995 annual meeting, an increase of 62% over a six-year period. The participation data for the 1996 annual meeting are not yet available. Interestingly, throughout this time, the participant data show that AERA annual programs have been able to maintain gender equity in the sense that the proportion of male/female participants were equal to the proportion of male/female membership in AERA. Data for minority participation were not available for the 1990 meeting, but the 1995 data show that the proportion (10%) of minority participants was somewhat lower than the proportion (15%) of minority membership in AERA. (For details, see the annual report sections in the August-September 1990 and 1995 Educational Researcher.)

The sessions I attended were selected on the basis of my personal, academic, and professional interests. Nonetheless, the sessions in which I participated covered a wide range of divisions and special interest groups, including learning and instruction, educational administration, history of education, higher education, school improvement, program evaluation, statistics and measurement, gender issues, minority issues, policy issues, and so on. Those sessions also included a fair sample of presentations by researchers, practitioners, and graduate students. The data I collected reveal a number of difficulties with paper presentations. For clarity, these problems are grouped into the following categories: general, organizer, and presenter.

Some General Issues
The most frequently identified general problem was insufficient time for in-depth explanation. On numerous occasions, presenters found it difficult to present the information in sufficient detail for the audience to follow logically. Furthermore, in many instances, the audience was given an insignificant amount of time—or no time at all—to interact with the presenters. One approach would be to limit the number of presentations per session to allow sufficient time for audience interaction. Generally, five presentations were scheduled for a typical 90-minute session. If a period of 30 minutes were set aside for the discussant and the audience, it would allow about 12 minutes per presenter to deliver research findings. Maybe program chairs should consider limiting the number of presentations to a maximum of four for 90-minute sessions. This would allow at least 15 minutes per presenter, 20 minutes for the discussant, and 10 minutes for the audience interaction.

We have paid little attention to the fact that the AERA annual meeting is becoming an international event.
White (1995) reported that the participation of international scholars at AERA annual meetings has increased throughout the years. According to White (1995), of the presenters at the 1994 annual meeting, a little more than 11% came from countries other than the U.S. Therefore, it is highly likely that for any given session with more than 10 participants there may be overseas scholars in the audience. The degree of congruence of the knowledge and understanding of the subject matter between the presenter and the audience is important for effective presentation. We seldom pay much attention to find out whether overseas participants are familiar with our educational structure when we talk to a mixed audience. In our subconscious minds, we take it for granted that "this is an AERA meeting, so this is an American audience." This thinking does not serve well our overseas participants. Hence, it is time to pay attention to the diversity of the audience at AERA meetings, not only in terms of gender, ethnicity, and other background but also in terms of overseas participation.

Similarly, the presenters from overseas also might tend to overlook the fact that the audience may not be familiar with the educational structures they are referring to as a result of their own familiarity with the subject matter they are presenting. More often, American members in the audience find it very difficult to follow a presentation that deals with European education systems, school structures, curriculum patterns, educational finance, and so on. Therefore, for both groups of presenters, American and non-American, it would be useful to get a feel of the audience before a particular presentation. This is not a time-consuming exercise. If there are participants in the audience who are not familiar with a particular educational system to which a presenter is referring, then it is vitally important for the presenter to take the time to explain or define the important concepts, terms, or structures.

Session Organizers Should Take Their Responsibilities Seriously

Recently, educational researchers and policymakers have paid much attention to issues such as accommodation, inclusion, tolerance, multicultural education, and diversity. Because the AERA community is in the forefront of advocating such policies, our annual meetings provide a golden opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to uphold them—we must practice what we teach. On a number of occasions, session organizers failed to demonstrate such commitment. It is the responsibility of session organizers to make the presenters and the audience feel welcome. Undoubtedly, almost every presenter at AERA meetings goes through an enormous amount of trouble to prepare him or herself for a presentation. Therefore, it is important for presenters to feel that their efforts are being acknowledged. Session organizers must shoulder this responsibility. Without waiting at the organizer's pulpit for presenters to come and greet the session organizers, they should look for and meet each presenter individually and extend a warm greeting to him or her. Session organizers should discuss and explain session logistics to presenters before a session begins. It is important to make sure that the seating arrangements are satisfactory and that there is sufficient space for the presenters to move about. If there is any doubt about how to pronounce a presenter’s name and/or her or his affiliation, session organizers—at least as a matter of professional courtesy—must take the necessary action to be comfortable with unfamiliar pronunciations.

The following incident is a prime example of erroneous judgment on the part of some session organizers. (On a number of occasions, I noticed scenarios similar to this example.) At a session, four presenters were scheduled to appear. About two or three minutes before the scheduled time, all four presenters were sitting in the front row and were getting ready for the presentation. A known scholar chaired that session. This chairperson came to the front row where the four presenters were getting ready. The session chair greeted three of the four presenters—those whose ethnic identity matched that of the session chair—but only glanced at the other presenter before finding comfort in the chair's designated seat. At the end of the session, I interviewed the “other” presenter to understand this scenario well. The following details are based on that interview. Unfortunately, the chair of that session left the room before I had a chance to talk with him.

According to the “other” presenter, she waited no time and hurried to the chair of the session and introduced herself. The session chair commented, “Yes, I saw you. I thought it must have been you.” To neutralize the discomfort this session chair exhibited, the “other” presenter said, “Last year, I attended your pre-annual meeting professional training session, and I enjoyed that.” The session chair asked, “Oh yeah? Where? Which one? I do this everywhere.” After answering this question, the “other” presenter retreated to her seat. When the time came for the “other” presenter to make her presentation, the session chair announced, "The next paper is . . . I can't pronounce her name, and she is from . . . ." I questioned myself: Is this another way of saying, “You don't belong here”? In the audience, the discomfort created by this incident transformed into a spell of silence, which was interrupted by someone’s murmur (referring to the chair, I presume), "What is the matter with these people?" According to the “other” presenter, there was no personal reason whatsoever for that treatment. AERA or AERA-affiliated regional organizations should not tolerate this kind of behavior by session organizers. As I witnessed this incident, it became clearer to me that if we are serious about improving the quality of American education, we have to abide by the policies we advocate. Incidents of this nature not only imply that all educators are not true educators but also contribute to tarnish AERA’s image. Therefore, failure on the part of session organizers to demonstrate AERA's commitment to policies of inclusion has to be remedied in earnest.

The success of a paper session also depends, to a large extent, on the mood and the interest of the audience. On numerous occasions, I asked myself whether I was participating in an AERA annual session or in a solemn occasion. A little bit of innocent humor can do no harm. Session organizers can make a significant impact on setting the tone of the session and creating an atmosphere conducive to the free flow of ideas. “Research for Education in a Democratic Society” necessarily demands the provision of adequate opportunities for the audience to participate in educational research dialogue for the refinement of ideas presented at these sessions. At
AERA meetings, this is particularly important for we must necessarily assume that the audience of any given session consists of many scholars who are well conversant with a given issue or topic. Moreover, an interaction between the presenter and the audience is crucial in cases where the presenter has adapted an analytical approach not widely used in her/his field of research. In similar situations, a vigilant session chair can make a difference by facilitating a dialogue between the presenter and the audience. In an attempt to encourage session organizers to be more effective, AERA should include the effectiveness of session organizers as an item on the annual meeting program evaluation. On a random basis, select at least two or three sessions from each division and evaluate them on aspects such as organizers’ demeanor, organizational logistics, facilitation of presenter-audience interaction, and time management.

Presentations Can Be Improved in Numerous Ways

Presenters can contribute significantly in making these presentations more effective and useful. Some of the issues encountered are organization and preparation; utilization of the allotted time; style of presentation; providing the information necessary to follow the presentation; providing crucial information, especially papers derived from funded projects; reference to other presentations; and scholarly and professional conduct.

Too often, presenters were not well prepared for their presentations. All too familiar apologetic statements were abundant. For example: “I am sorry. I haven’t brought this with me. If you are interested, please . . . .” As Hampel (1995) reminded us, a simple fact of academic life is that we juggle too many responsibilities. More often, we do not even have the time to send the paper to session organizers within a reasonable time. Once we send the paper to session organizers, we tend to relax. In fact, that is when the next responsibility begins—getting ready for the presentation. It is important to understand the difference between writing a paper and presenting it to an academic audience. One has to prepare especially well for a successful presentation. Once the paper is ready, a presenter has to synthesize that paper into a summary that can be delivered within a given time period. In synthesizing a paper, one has to decide what information is important and necessary for the audience to follow the presentation. If this preparation is not made, a presenter may end up wasting much time on trivial and unnecessary details and may be unable to cover the important information. Of the 748 presenters I observed, 316 of them struggled with this problem.

Given the limited amount of time, a presenter has to identify the most important things to get across to the audience. Therefore, it is important to decide on the most important pieces of information and the extent to which they have to be explained. The need for explanation of technical concepts or procedures depends on the type of audience; this is, to a great extent, determined by the theme of the session. For example, for a session titled “Classification and Categorical Data Analysis,” a definition of logistic regression may be unnecessary, but what is meant by critical pedagogy may need to be explained. Similarly, for a session on “Postpositivist Paradigms,” a definition of critical pedagogy may be quite unnecessary, yet the logistic regression technique may need to be defined.

Some presenters prepared the whole presentation, word for word, in a series of transparencies; some prepared 15 to 20 tables for the presentation. Too often, presenters found themselves in the middle of a paper mess, looking for a particular transparency. The result was not only a waste of time but also a frustrating experience for everyone, especially the presenter. To prepare the whole presentation verbatim through a series of transparencies is probably not a good idea because such a presentation can become a torpid exercise. Furthermore, a presenter has to pay attention not only to the style of presentation, but also to the substance or the content of her/his presentation. This depends to a great extent on her/his ability to utilize the allotted time wisely.

Generally the time allotted for each presenter to summarize a series of information on a given research topic can range somewhere between 12 and 15 minutes. In the allotted time, roughly equal amounts of time can be
devoted to: (a) background, (b) research method, (c) data analyses and interpretation, and (d) conclusion, policy implications, and recommendations. In explaining the background of a typical research study, a brief explanation of the existing body of knowledge and the need for the given research can be covered. For policy-related research, background information may include the existing problems with current policy, methods, and strategies, and the need for alternatives. Concerning the research method, a presenter can explain the way the research was conducted, how the data were collected, and so on. No time should be spent on justifying the research method chosen, a discussion which may have been embedded in the paper. In explaining the data analysis, trivial information needs to be avoided. The most important analyses that really showed the difference or that helped to delineate the major finding can be explained in detail, together with the findings and their interpretation. Generally, no time should be spent on elaborating the proof of a theory, the derivation of formulae, and the analytical techniques used unless the whole focus of the research was to examine such aspects. Most often, it is the last section that becomes the victim of, “I am running out of time.” Yet for the audience, this is one of the most important aspects they hoped to hear. It is extremely important to explain the significance of the findings and the policy implication and/or implications for further research. Therefore, sufficient time has to be earmarked for this important piece of information.

The following is an effective way to prepare materials for presentation:

- Once a paper is in its final form, prepare a point-by-point summary covering background; research method; data analyses and interpretation; and conclusion, policy implications, and recommendations.
- Organize this summary in a sequential/logical order.
- Fit this summary onto four or five pages where each point (fact) is preceded by a bullet, importantly, in bold letters of font size 24 or larger. (An audience cannot read tiny letters!)
- If needed, prepare one or two pages of tables and/or graphs. (Always avoid long tables—for example 20 rows by 10 columns—as they are difficult to read. If it is important to refer to such tables, please direct the audience to the page number in the document, which is to be circulated before the presentation.)
- Prepare transparencies of those pages and a title page with the presenter(s)'s name(s) and affiliation(s). Contact information can be omitted since such information should have been included in the paper distributed at the beginning of the session. Now a presenter's task is simply to go through points as shown in the transparencies.

Every effort must be made to utilize visual aids for presentations for a number of reasons.

- Not many presenters can do a good job reading from a text.
- A continuous speech on a research topic may not fare well with the audience.
- A presentation with no visual aids may not be useful to overseas participants.
- A presentation with no visual aids may not be useful even for an American audience in light of the increasing cultural and regional diversity at AERA annual meetings.
Furthermore, listening to a speech and going through a paper simultaneously do not work well for many people in any given audience. Therefore, it is important to keep the attention of the audience fixed on something visible. Then a presenter can elaborate on any point on the screen in detail. The audience will be able to comprehend the presenter's detail because the audience can follow the presenter in the context of the highlighted point. This is an effective way to solve problems arising from divergent forms of pronunciation, accent, dialect, and so on. When moving through the points in a transparency, it is useful to point to the bullet that is being discussed. If a presenter cannot hold a laser light steady, she/he should avoid using a laser light to highlight the point under discussion. The audience finds it extremely annoying to try to locate a point on the screen when directed by a moving laser light. Similarly, when a presenter pays no attention to the audience by keeping her/his eyes glued to the projector/screen or any other paraphernalia, the audience can get distracted easily. Therefore, during the presentation, a presenter should speak to the audience to secure their undivided attention.

At the beginning, in a summary, a presenter should explain what she/he is going to say (what her/his talk is about). During the presentation, a couple of decent and relevant jokes can do no harm. At the end, a presenter should summarize what she/he has already said. When time is up, invite the audience to participate: “During the discussion period, I will be glad to answer any questions or to provide further details.” It is extremely important to exercise good professional judgment and to utilize diplomatic skills in responding to questions from the audience. For the novice—for example, graduate students—it is extremely important to rehearse the presentation to an audience of their colleagues (fellow students or professors who have experience and can provide guidance and advice). Typically, a conference of this magnitude is bound to raise some concerns for new participants, particularly for graduate students (Allen, 1995).

An important part of preparing for presentation includes taking care of some logistical matters. A presenter has to:

- Find the venue (location of the hotel, floor, and the room number/name) of her/his presentation;
- Learn how to reach that venue; and
- Put presentation materials in sequential order before the presentation.

Sometimes extra materials—sheets of paper, a marker—may come in handy. Every effort must be made to arrive early at the presentation venue. If possible, the presenter should try to avoid carrying unnecessary paraphernalia to the session so as to minimize the chance of confusion, stress, and exhaustion. Depending on the time of day at which a presentation is scheduled, some precautionary actions may be needed to neutralize the physical and psychological condition of the presenter. Some examples in this context include having a comfortable sleep the night before the presentation (highly recommended for presentations scheduled during the afternoon sessions), taking a light meal before the presentation, and bringing the necessary supplies to take care of exacerbating conditions (coughs, colds, allergies, etc.).

Presenters must also be able to make

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**RACIAL AND ETHNIC EXCLUSION**

**IN EDUCATION AND SOCIETY**

*An Anthropology and Education Quarterly theme issue guest-edited by José Macías*

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professionally responsible decisions. Over the last seven years, I have listened to the following (or some variation of it) on 18 occasions:

We are sorry. We have no prepared paper to distribute on our topic. This research is funded by . . . and the funding agency is still evaluating our findings. We are not authorized to disseminate our findings yet. We can explain our research design and nothing more. If you are interested in receiving a copy of this paper when it is available for dissemination, we would be glad to send you one if you leave your card with us.

After having left my card on these occasions, more than three years has gone by, and I am still waiting for one such promise to materialize. It is an unwavering responsibility on the part of those who plan to present a paper based on funded research to obtain the necessary clearance from the required authorities before submitting a paper proposal. It is frustrating for the audience to merely listen to someone’s research design at an AERA meeting. The average audience at an AERA session has advanced well beyond seeking information on how to prepare a research proposal. Therefore, those who are constrained to disseminate their research should not submit a proposal or should withdraw their presentation well in advance. Such action, I am sure, would be much appreciated by the AERA community. Think of the deprived opportunity of another researcher—for example, a doctoral student or an untenured faculty member—who was desperately looking for a chance to present a paper at an AERA annual meeting.

It is important to keep in mind that the audience for any particular session is filled with scholars and practitioners who are very much interested in a given topic. So the presenter should expect to speak to the best in the field. This does not necessarily imply that one should always expect an audience with a uniform level of knowledge and interest in a given topic. A presenter should talk about and elaborate on only the ideas she/he understands well. The AERA audience can gauge a presenter’s subject matter knowledge fairly well. Therefore, a presenter should know her/his materials thoroughly for any meaningful presenta-

Call for AERA Awards Nominations

The AERA Committee on the Role and Status of Minorities in Educational Research and Development is accepting nominations for the following awards to be presented at the annual meeting in Chicago in 1997:

- **Distinguished Career Contribution Award**
  Selection/eligibility criteria: Significant lifelong contribution to minority-related research issues by scholar or significant lifelong contribution to educational R&D by minority scholar. Nominees are at a senior level of appointment in their careers, usually 30 or more years beyond the doctoral degree.

- **Distinguished Scholar Award**
  Selection/eligibility criteria: Significant contribution to minority-related research issues by scholar or significant contribution to educational R&D by minority scholar. Nominees are usually beyond the first level of professional appointment in career or 10 or more years beyond the doctoral degree.

- **Early Career Contribution Award**
  Selection/eligibility criteria: Significant contribution to minority-related research issues by scholar or significant contribution to educational R&D by minority scholar. Nominees are usually within first decade of career following receipt of doctoral degree.

Please send letter of nomination and curriculum vitae by September 26, 1996, to Richard Ruiz, College of Education, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721. One award may be made in each category annually. Awards are presented at a breakfast ceremony at the annual meeting.