What Makes for a Fantastic Conference Keynote Address?

Keynote presentations can make conferences sink or soar. This vital part of the meeting schedule, in which the whole conference listens to an invited guest speaker, can move delegates into raptures of intellectual and emotional sparks. Alternatively, a poor or ill-judged keynote can leave the room overwhelmingly alienated, aching in disappointment. In this month’s Special Issue, we feature the contributions from some of the keynotes from recent conferences hosted by the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology (IIQM).

Here, we consider what makes for an excellent keynote address and how we can work together to ensure more keynotes inform and inspire.

The Authentic Presenter

Authenticity can be both nominal and expressive—referring respectively to the degree to which work reflects intentions or traditions of the author and also the sincerity or genuineness judged to underpin the work. Consequently, a presentation may be delivered competently and passionately (Bekker & Clark, 2018) but still lack authenticity (Morgan, 2008).

Authenticity in work and leadership builds trust and fosters a powerful sense of shared identification (Morgan, 2008). Although vital to relationships, defining authenticity is challenging—being evident as much by its absence as its presence. Authenticity is socially bound and culturally specific. Parallels exist between authenticity in presentations and other forms of social conversation, notably via social media (Marwick and Boyd, 2010) and in everyday interpersonal encounters (Goffman, 1959). Interestingly, authenticity is inversely related to how calculated a person is judged to be trying to be authentic. Attempts to be authentic that appear contrived can reduce perceived authenticity (Marwick and Boyd, 2010).

While great keynotes defy any supposed commonalities, authentic addresses often contain a fusion of the presenters’ natural passion for their topic, a sense of personal openness—for example, to share openly their thoughts, fears, personal stories, vulnerabilities, or failings—and an ability to read, anticipate, and respond to the audience’s thoughts and feelings as the presentation progresses (Morgan, 2008). Ultimately, it’s the shared humanity of the authentic speaker that matters. In them, with them, through them, authenticity moves audiences to a higher plane than mere content alone explains.

The Credible Presenter

It’s tempting to conflate the likely quality of a keynote presentation with the perceived notoriety of the speaker. We have all experienced heady excitement and nervous anticipation when we first get to hear and meet the scholar whose work has shaped our own development. Well-known authors writing in methods, unlike many other areas of scholarship, can incite doses of discipleship and fandom. This “name-factor” forms an instrumental part of why some delegates will choose to attend a conference.

Yet, credibility, it transpires, arrives on a snail but can leave on a horse. Credibility comes from currency—an informed and up-to-date knowledge of the relevant scholarly conversations germane to a scholarly area with a clear perspective or “angle” on the subject matter to hand (Thomson & Kamler, 2013). Most clumsily, currency goes awry when presenters demonstrate a low awareness of contemporary or historical debates in relevant literatures, for example, from excessive or blinkered self-citation. Reputation alone will not necessarily make for a better keynote if the presenter’s pronouncements are judged to be dated, or otherwise poorly prepared or conveyed.

Credibility is additionally broadcast in other subtle ways. A decade-long track record of scholarship (with attendant senior status and long resume) may be expected in some settings, but less crucial in others—for example, when a presenter has written this year’s “hot book” or pioneered a novel approach that has attracted rapid interest. With many of today’s most senior qualitative researchers in their 70s and 80s, it’s vital for the future of qualitative research that this more diverse conception of credibility is considered in nominations for keynote presenters. These new and diverse voices are vital to the future of qualitative research.

The Engaged, Connected, Flowful Audience

While there is a strong element of expressing the authentic and credible self in a keynote, ultimately the potential of a keynote presentation is realized by what happens between presenters...
and audiences—the spark of mutual connection and engagement.

Compelling presentations and presenters often speak to people’s heads and their hearts—the core elements of rhetoric, the intellect, and the emotional—and harness these well-established facets together (Leith, 2012). The intellectual synergizes with the inspirational—moving audiences into what has been termed “flow,” a mental state characterized by full immersion and energized focus (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).

We disagree wholeheartedly that flow must come from a single presentational path. Indeed, attempts to be too overtly emotional or engaging can be jarringly counterproductive. Yet, connecting and engaging well with an audience seldom happens by accident or is motivated solely by the points a presenter seeks to express. Instead, exceptional presenters take thoughtful account of the characteristics of the audience to find captivating ways to frame and present material to audiences and take calculated risks thereon. This necessitates presenters understand, anticipate, and plan for how they and their content is going to be perceived by different segments of an audience, addressing questions like:

- Who is the audience composed of? Which main segments? Which proportions?
- What is likely to excite or daumer each of these groups? Which groups are likely to be friendly or sceptical of the presenter or presentation?
- What foreknowledge can be assumed of the different audience segments?
- What topics or messages are different audience segments most passionate about?

A keynote cannot satisfy everyone the same—yet great keynotes satisfy every delegate enough and different delegates differently. Ideally, all main segments of the audience will derive useful insights or meaning from the keynote that speaks to their own particular concerns or interests. This multiplicity of meanings can occur around different parts of the keynote but also around ostensibly the same material. This occurs for example when the identical section of a keynote moves some people emotionally based on their identification from past personal experiences but challenges others without such experience to see the world differently. This effect is evident across a wide variety of social and learning experiences, including museums and festivals (Van Winkle, Christine, & John, 2015). In this way, extremely skilled presenters can make optimal use of presentational time by deliberately designing material to appeal simultaneously to more than one group.

The Audience Provoked

In contrast to the persuasion of political speeches (Leith, 2012), audiences don’t necessarily have to agree with keynotes for them to be effective. Rather, keynotes should inspire audiences to care by opening enticing spaces for delegates to think clearly, creatively, and openly, and even debate fiercely. As such, it’s less important for keynotes to share content that all or even most people will mostly agree with. Indeed, caring too much about an audience’s reaction may render the keynote’s messages to be too hedged toward bland beige safety.

At its most useful, a keynote address forms a transcending interpretive lens or reference point for the whole conference—setting the stage and tone for the whole event. When most compelling, exceptional keynotes speak to challenging scholarly silences yet open safe spaces and places for audiences to think the previously unthought or share the unsayable. Truly provocative keynotes are intensely memorable—days or even years later impacting framing, thoughts, or actions in ways that leave people changed.

The Audience Inspired

Inspiration is often integral to great keynotes—being an impetus for new or renewed efforts to think and act in more engaged or excited ways through a combination of the presenter and the content. Good keynotes, in this way, seldom end with the keynote itself.

Yet, like engagement and connection, while inspiration can be loud and immediate, it can also be subtle and slow-burning. Inspiration is not necessarily the stereotypical polished speaker recounting their personal stories before leaving on a strident call to action. Inspirational keynotes may also be quiet, grounded in ethics, and even understated.

Promoting Better Keynotes

IIQM aims to encourage and showcase vibrant and diverse voices at our conferences, including in the selection of our conference keynotes. We have been working to do this via new conference formats, such as our shorter length microkeynotes, and will continue to do so in the years to come as we experiment with other alternative presentation formats. But how can the qualitative community work together better to promote better keynotes?

Conference organizers should provide keynote speakers with accurate anticipated breakdowns of audience segments and the “culture” of the particular conference. Insights into their interests, needs, fears, and challenges can be particularly useful. Prior to writing their presentation, keynote presenters should ask lots of questions of conference organizers—because only then can they better ensure their material has the right balance and reach in terms of assumed expertise, shared understandings, disciplinary perspectives, and resonance across age, career stage, and role.

While keynote presenters arguably have a duty to make the most of each delegate’s time and attention when they get the opportunity to present to the “big room,” it is important too that conference delegates provide feedback to presenters via conference feedback surveys on what worked well for them—and what could be improved. As feedback tends to come from the minority who are either very happy or unhappy, it’s helpful when as many conference delegates as possible provide feedback.
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