

Cranky about boring conferences! Let's design them for authentic learning experiences!

I have been to a couple of conferences recently that have made me determined not to attend any more conferences again, not unless I can tell from their marketing material that they are going to be interactive and engaging.

I would have thought that with all the wonderful methods available to conference planners that to have two days of hour-long presentations one after another and death by PowerPoint would have been a thing of the past.

I do exaggerate somewhat, both conferences did have some panel presentations and panel discussions, but with limited scope for audience involvement.

Questions and comments from the audience were limited to ten minutes at the most at the end of a presentation. At one of the conferences there was a presenter who engaged the audience in discussion and reflection, but this was only one.

At the most recent conference I was exhausted by lunchtime on the second day and ran away to an art gallery instead.

The worst thing about these conferences is that they were in the education sector – yes all about learning and development and innovation, what's more. Innovation! Time that these conference planners thought about innovation in terms of the conference itself and modelling best practice in learning! Not modelling old paradigms of learning.

I have tucked away in my files a paper written by Tree Bresson with Debbie Sugarman and an organisation called Sunrise Facilitation (what marvellous names!). Check www.treegroup.info/

The paper contains some great ideas about how to make conferences come alive and has this advice about the proportion of time devoted to expert time and participatory time.

- Lectures by one person: one hour or less per day. Definitely no more than 90 minutes
- Panels (2-4 people): 3 hours or less per day
- Full participatory methods: at least half your total time together.

And then there are a plethora of methods:

- Works café <http://www.theworldcafe.com>
- Open space technology <http://openspaceworld.org/wp2/>
- Trampoline <http://trapolineday.com>
- Appreciative enquiry <http://www.centerforappreciativeinquiry.net>

And I am sure you know of many others.

And I would love to hear about good conference experiences (in the spirit of appreciative enquiry) and what your favourite methods are.