Facilitating Exploratory Conversations: Here and Now

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Abstract

The format of academic conferences has generally remained unchanged for decades. It has on the whole been taken for granted despite major advances in communication technologies. The panel’s objective is to learn if and how computer-mediated conversations increase the audience's participation level and capability to offer, discuss, and refine exploratory comments that a speaker's paper might stimulate. To this end, we propose an experiential exercise in which the audience will use an internet-based wiki to support exploratory conversations while listening to Bob Zmud’s lecture about ‘Overcoming Cognitive Boundaries in Knowledge Sharing’ and then discussing it. To manage the complexity and risk of the experiment, we will offer access to the wiki to the FIRST 20 registrants. (If interested, please email Dov.Te’eni@case.edu.) Therefore, while the panel will be open to all ICIS conference participants, 20 of the participants will be engaged in the exploration via the internet and other participants are invited to participate orally in the face-to-face discussions.

Keywords: wikis, online learning
This experiential (and unconventional) panel will use technology to engage the audience in exploratory conversations simultaneously with a traditional conference lecture. The discussion on the lecture topic will then be followed by a debate over how technology was used to change the nature of the lecture and the ensuing discussion. The audience's experience during the lecture will therefore inform the debate about the use of technology. These two discourses – 1) the traditional conference lecture with its discussion and 2) the debate about use of technology in lectures - will be supported by technologies usable by novices, including wiki and internet browser.

Objective of Panel
The format of academic conference presentations has generally remained unchanged for decades, still largely propagating the “sage on the stage” model with limited audience interaction. The model does not take advantage of the high level of intellectual capacity within the audience, nor does it allow the audience to engage in significant social knowledge construction. The model has on the whole been taken for granted despite major advances in communication technologies and new insights into knowledge construction, learning, and collective intelligence.

The panel's objective is to learn if and how computer-mediated conversations increase audience participation and provide the capability to submit, discuss, and refine exploratory comments that a speaker's presentation might stimulate. By making the conversation persistent and capturing them as editable web pages, the outcome becomes explicit, tangible, and of use to everyone, even those unable to attend the presentation itself. Furthermore, by engaging many well-informed individuals concurrently, we can draw on their collective intelligence to develop additional insights and alternative viewpoints in little time.

Lessons from this experiential exercise will be used to shape the use of technology at ICIS 2008.

Panel Format
To this end, we propose an experiential exercise in which the “audience” uses technology to support exploratory, concurrent conversations while listening to the speaker's lecture and then reflecting on it. The speaker will provide a “discussion outline” online which structures (but does not restrict) the concurrent capture and discussion of ideas. Using software that facilitates the discussion, with a wiki as its core element, will permanently capture the results, facilitate building upon others’ ideas, and integrate divergent thoughts. While the speaker continues to own the “front channel”, the audience now manipulates the “back channel”. At his discretion, the speaker can at times even consult the back channel so as to guide the ongoing presentation, or subsequent discussion.

Risk Management
To manage the complexity and risk of the experiment, only 20 participants will be connected to the system, using their own laptop computers. They will pre-register in order to receive a tutorial and to configure and test their computers before the panel. The system will be web based, requiring only browser technology and Internet access. To mitigate the risk of unexpectedly failing Internet technology, a back-up server and wireless router will be brought into the
presentation session, enabling participants to connect to this backup system, if needed. In addition, we propose a document-camera in the event the wireless connection fails.

Panel Submitters
Guest Speaker: Bob Zmud
Facilitators: Ann Majchrzak, Kishore Sengupta, Dov Te’eni, Chris Wagner

Speaker and topic of lecture
- **Speaker:** Robert W. Zmud
- **Topic and synopsis:** Overcoming Cognitive Boundaries in Knowledge Sharing
  Many, if not most, of the phenomena of interest to information systems scholars require that information and knowledge be shared across cognitive boundaries, that is, between actors holding distinctive, often non-overlapping cognitive schema. Organizational scientists examining knowledge sharing across boundaries have proposed explanations for communication failure as well as tactics for overcoming these cognitive barriers. This presentation will synthesize current research, giving special attention to the roles served by information technologies in contributing to communication failures and to facilitating successful resolution tactics.
- Bob is one of the highest profile researchers in the IS academic discipline. He has picked a topic that is not only of relevance to his current research, but fits well within research themes that have garnered much attention lately: knowledge management, knowledge sharing, and socio-cognitive models. Moreover, his choice of a topic fits well with the objective of the panel: to encourage knowledge-sharing across the diverse ICIS community. He has agreed to structure the talk in such a way that it will stimulate audience reaction, and has also agreed to publish his lecture notes in advance to help seed the computer-mediated conversations held in parallel to Bob's lecture (see below).

Structure of session
The 90-minute session will use three channels of communication: face-to-face interactive (traditional lecture), computer-mediated interaction (wiki) and knowledge-base (internet access). The audience in the room will be encouraged - while listening to the speaker - to search the internet (for relevant knowledge sources), to add and shape the notes on the wiki pages in an effort to develop a summary paper on the topic, and to engage in discussions via a wiki discussion page.

The panel will proceed in 3 parts: I) 10-minute introduction, II) a 40-minute lecture/discussion and III) a 40-minute debate.

I. **Introduction** (minutes 0-10). Explain to the audience the purpose of the panel, ensure that the members of the audience have access and know how to use the tools, and understand the concept of wikis and how to use them. Other audience members will also be instructed not to attempt to “hack” into the system. A short guidance note will be handed to all audience members explaining purpose and flow of the session. **Dov Te’eni** will lead this part of the panel.

II. **Traditional style lecture and discussion** (minutes 10-50), which includes:
1) Lecture (20 minutes). This is the time allocated to the speaker. During this time, the audience will be encouraged to use internet access to obtain relevant information from the internet, contribute to the wiki by helping to collaboratively write and edit wiki pages on the topic, pages that were either produced as part of an outline, or which are newly created by the audience. The wiki will contain Bob Zmud’s speaker notes, with each point in the notes designated as a separate, but linked wiki page. In contributing to wiki discussion pages or by adding comments, they will be able to share reactions, questions and answers. Following the wiki norms, the audience will be encouraged to make short constructive contributions to the emerging wiki document (rather than lengthy comments); contributions that will help to define the theoretical and practical problem being addressed by the topic, identify areas of controversies, areas needing further research, definitions of critical concepts, possible theoretical perspectives that might help to elaborate the topic, etc.

Experience with wikis in other contexts suggests that people will take individual interest/ownership in particular aspects of the talk, and thus the multi-page, linked web format allows people to contribute in those aspects in which they are the most interested. In this way, people can contribute to different parts of the talk, without interfering with each other. Each wiki page (describing a point in the talk) will have its own discussion/comment tab/page and the audience will be encouraged to use the discussion page for exploratory reactions, questions, and answers, migrating to adding to the wiki document when they feel ready. Ann Majchrzak and Kishore Sengupta will encourage contributions to the wiki by injecting questions and comments on the discussion pages, adding content to the emerging document, and helping to ensure that the contributions remain organized by differentiating and integrating. Chris Wagner will attend to a kiosk for use by participants who do not have a laptop.

2) Discussion on the Speaker’s Topic (20 minutes): As with a traditional lecture, the Speaker’s lecture will be followed by an opportunity for the audience to ask questions of the speaker and offer comments. This process will be facilitated by Ann Majchrzak, serving the role of a classic moderator. In addition, Chris Wagner will transcribe these questions, comments, responses directly into the wiki discussion pages. Finally, the audience will continue to use the wiki as well during this discussion, by continuing to constructively add to the emerging wiki document. The document can be either shown on a secondary large screen, or if a secondary screen is unavailable, by switching the source for the primary screen from front channel to back channel as suitable. In the event of technical problems with the participants’ online communication, Ann and Chris will record comments from the audience and insert them to a back-up wiki.

III. Debate and feedback on the experimental experience (minutes 50-90). During this third part, the purpose is to elicit the views of the audience – both positive and critical - on the injection of technology into a lecture/discussion setting, and get their suggestions so as to enhance the learning and exploration, Ann Majchrzak and Dov Te’eni will lead the discussion with Chris transcribing all audience comments (while the 20 with own computer access will be able to comment directly) on their reactions to the experimental lecture session. Ann will summarize and elaborate on the pros based on demonstrations in the CMC literature of how interactivity, structure and access to knowledge facilitate concurrent thought and communication processes and trigger exploration and alternative views. Dov will summarize and elaborate on the cons based on arguments in psychology and education about the cognitive and motivational
disturbances to comprehension and attention. Kishore will address the implications of the pros and cons on specifications for technology usage in future conferences. More specifically, the discussion at this phase will address the following 5 questions:

1) Were there any new ideas generated during the speaker’s session, either from the speaker or from the audience via the technologies?
2) Was new knowledge obtained from the speaker, audience members, or the internet in the course of the speaker’s session?
3) What role did technology play in facilitating the new ideas/knowledge?
4) What limitations did you face in using the technology?
5) Were there other knowledge-sharing outcomes such as greater flow of knowledge, change in the structure of one’s knowledge, or exposure to new knowledge?

Data collection and analysis

1. Quantitative Feedback

We plan to employ research assistants to observe and record a sample of participants work with the technology. Additionally, the researchers, using an interview protocol, will elicit the participants' perceptions of how the technologies affected their work. Additionally, at the end of the session, we may post an online survey and ask the participants to complete it immediately. The survey will ask them about their role in the session, participation type and level, their perceived learning, and satisfaction with the session.

2. Data Analysis and Reporting

The wiki will be posted for continuous access after the session since we are interested in determining if the discussion continues beyond the confines of a limited panel. The wiki will be content-analyzed for the number and quality of ideas and knowledge items generated during the discussion. Since participants will have been registered to the wiki, we will be able to relate survey responses to their contributions on the wiki, and possibly to the interviews.

We will report the results of the analysis in written form (e.g., CAIS article) as well as at the next ICIS, as well as share them online.

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