

Wednesday 27th May, 2015

Summary: CICASP Seminar 04
Asking and Answering Questions after a Presentation

This was the first of a series of seminars about asking and answering questions after presentations. These are important skills, and neither of them is easy. Many people only get practice at answering questions about their research, in English, on the day. The first half of the seminar provided you with some information and advice on how best to ask and answer questions (see pages 2-4). Next Claire gave an example 'bio' presentation of under 5 min. Fred then asked some surprise questions about the presentation (some good, some bad and some ugly!). Claire gave several different example answers to each question (some good and some exactly what you want to avoid doing!).

Wednesday 3rd June, 2015

Outline: CICASP Seminar 05
Asking and Answering Questions after a Presentation: Student Practice

From next week's seminar we are giving you the opportunity to practise the important skills of both asking and answering questions. We will have about three talks per seminar. Who will talk next will be decided by drawing names from a hat. The main thing to remember is that neither questions nor answers need to be perfect – be brave, give it a go and you will improve. Very few people find answering unexpected questions easy. In these seminars you will be asked about a topic that you are very familiar with (yourself and your research) in a friendly and relaxed environment. By the time you have to answer questions at an International conference you will be much better prepared.

Preparation for next week:

Prepare your own 'Bio' Presentation: introduce yourself and your research

- < 5 mins
- Use the written and 'Bio' and spoken 'Elevator Speech' that you have already prepared
- Prepare for questions

It is up to you what you present. These pointers should help you:

- About me
- What is my Research Question?
- What is my plan to answer it?
- Why is my Research Important?

The following is some information and advice. Remember, though, that there is not really a right and wrong way; this information, particularly the example responses, is given to make you think and work out what you feel is the best way to go about it.

Asking Questions after Talks

- 1) What to ask?
- 2) How best to ask it?

Before you ask..

- Okay to ask for Clarification
- Is your question appropriate/relevant/likely of interest to most of the audience?
- International Conference – remember, you can also ask after the session

How to ask Questions?

- Brief, clear, loud
- Respectful: wording, tone, body language, voice, smiling
- Non-confrontational
- Be careful not to openly criticise
- Avoid being judgemental, sarcastic, sneering, self-righteous etc.

Examples...

“Should that be X, instead of Y”, *not* “that should be...”

“You just said x, but the text seems to say y. Could you talk about the difference?”

“I didn’t understand how you went from step A to step B“

“You covered x earlier, but I’m still not quite clear on.... Please, could you explain?”

A Controversial Issue...

Should you compliment the Speaker before asking your question?

- “great talk,...”
- “really enjoyed this talk,...”
- “you’re studying a very interesting question,...”

Yes

- Offsets a question that may sound critical
- Only if your honest opinion
- Compliments from well-established, well-regarded scientists boost to junior scientists
- If yes, keep it very short!

No

- Question time is too short
- Can sound insincere/offhand because brief
- Compliments can be made after the talk
- Can become repetitive/trite
- Use tone of voice, etc., to express appreciation indirectly

Answering Questions after Talks

Contexts

- Departmental/Section Seminar
- International Conference
- Specialist Panel
- Talk to general public/high-school
- Presentation – part of job interview

Different contexts = Different audiences, different amount of time for questions, so different responses

First of all, if you get any questions then that is already a good sign:

- Your audience is still awake
- They are interested and engaged with your talk

Aim?

- Answers as 'polished' as talk
- Stay calm
- Short, clear answers (limited time!)
- Avoid 'bluffing'
- Be prepared

How to 'Ace' Question-time?

A) Advance Preparation

- 1) Think about likely questions
 - Any study weaknesses?
 - Remind yourself of reasoning
 - Future directions?
 - What has been asked about this study before?

- 2) Additional 'back-up' slides (not part of main talk)
 - extra detail (if complex topic)
 - figures/Tables
 - details of method

Think: Have I left anything out due to time limit that might be of interest?

- 3) Paper Sheets/tablet with extra numbers, etc., that you can refer to
- 4) Find out Q & A Format
- 5) Prepare Yourself Mentally
- 6) Give contact on end slide
- 7) Sleep well

B) Strategies to use 'on-the-day'

- 1) Listen
- 2) Understand
- 3) Respond
 - Respond in a calm, positive and enthusiastic manner.
 - Keep answers brief and focused.
 - Address whole audience
 - Short answers are best (30 sec – 1 min)

Some challenges you might face...

Difficult Questions

- Take your time

- Don't have data to hand? – explain and offer to follow-up later
- Okay not to know the answer
(better to admit you don't know than to give an uninformed answer)
- You could give some related information

Examples...

"I don't know"

"I'll get back to you on that"

"That's an interesting point of view, I haven't really thought of this aspect yet".

"We haven't looked into that yet, but it is [on our to-do list / one of our future lines of research / the next idea we want to explore]".

Stupid Questions

1) Is it really a stupid question?

Maybe..

- one word incorrect?
- they have misunderstood something ?
- they know something you don't?
- You have misunderstood it?
 - Ask for clarification
 - Think before you answer
 - Questions are not always what they seem

2) What if you are *sure* that it is a stupid question?

- Always be respectful
- Answer it seriously
- Tell the facts

Example...

"Assuming I've heard and understood you correctly, the answer to your question is X. I'd be happy to elaborate - can we take this up after the talk?"

Question that is not a question...

"I'll take that as a statement, rather than a question."

Aggressive Questions

Suggestions

- Respond as if no aggression
- Avoid letting it upset/fluster you
- If you can, refute their points calmly
- Audience will probably be on your side

Examples

e.g., "Actually, _____ et al. showed in a paper last year that this method works quite well"

e.g., "The jury is still out on that question, but our results show it's worth investigating further".

"Maybe we can discuss those details individually later. "

[References/Acknowledgements: Information and some direct quotes taken from:

1) Questions and comments posted on the discussion forum: <www.academia.stackexchange.com>;

2) University of Leicester Guide to 'Responding to Questions Effectively'

<<http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/presentations/questions>>;

3) Prof. David Pannell of the University of Western Australia, Homepage

<<http://www.pannelldiscussions.net/2011/03/181-answering-questions-after-presenting-a-seminar-or-conference-paper/>>.]