

Doing Being the Moderator: Use of “Respondent Selection” During Webinar Q&As

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INTRODUCTION

During an online webinar, a question and answer (Q&A) segment is a valuable time during which audience members can petition an institution’s hosting representatives to clarify, expand upon, or otherwise assist with questions or issues that remain after a presentation has been made. As would be the case in any information-dissemination event, it is presumably important to all parties involved that these questions are handled in a satisfactory manner. In a typical webinar, one representative acts as the moderator, whose role it is to facilitate the interaction during the Q&A. In some ways, the responsibilities of this individual are tied to the technological set-up of the event. The webinars in the present study are audio-only (i.e., video conferencing is not used), and audience members are limited to using a “chat” feature in order to pose questions (i.e., a call-in feature is not used). Within this particular dynamic, the moderator takes on a complex third-party role. On the one hand, she must act as the “voice” of the audience members, reading their written questions aloud for all to hear and serving as an interactional bridge between the other two parties; on the other hand, the moderator is also responsible for ensuring that the interaction runs smoothly and efficiently, and that all questions are addressed in a timely manner.

In the hope of shedding light on the interactional role of moderators within this arguably complex dynamic, this study uses conversation analysis (CA) to examine how moderators manage question-answer sequences in audio-only webinars. Drawn from a larger study on moderator practices, this paper will report on *respondent selection*, which is one of several practices that moderators were found to do during Q&A interactions.

BACKGROUND

To my knowledge, there have been no CA studies on online webinar interaction, let alone on moderator talk during Q&A segments of online webinars. However, there has been a fair amount of interdisciplinary work in fields such as distance education, or science and technology, which falls under the umbrella of “best practices” literature. Most of this work is non-empirical and is based on the authors’ personal experiences. However, a small quantity does involve empirical research, and much of the overall body of literature touches upon how to moderate and involve audience participants during online webinars. For example, Lande’s (2011) literature review examined instructional how-to materials on doing webinars. Noting that an extensive search for published journal articles and studies on webinar effectiveness had been unfruitful, the author’s review reported predominantly on white papers and other informational online articles. Among the many points that she synthesized from these materials, Lande (2011) found one recurrent suggestion to be that, since moderators have to manage multiple factors, including technology, reading audience questions, and ensuring that the Q&A interaction generally runs smoothly, it is important that participants not try to be *both* a presenter and a moderator.

Zoumenou et al. (2015) did an empirical study that combined the results of a literature review and interview data to identify some best practices as well. One of the several assertions that they made based on the results of their data review was that it is important to “allow participants to ask questions after presentations by using the chat box” (p. 68).

In general, the body of best practices literature on giving webinars uses hosts’ prior experience as a resource to provide tips on a variety of preparations, considerations, or actions that might lend to smoother, more effective, and more engaging webinars. While these suggestions may be useful and relevant, none of this work offers in-depth analysis of actual webinar interaction. By doing a micro-analysis of the interaction in several webinars, this study aims to begin to fill this gap in the literature.

DATA AND METHOD

The data for this study were 17 webinars from a larger collection of publicly available online events hosted by a philanthropic organization in the U.S. In general, all of the webinars aimed to communicate with external audiences about the organization’s mission and programs devoted to improving public health, however, there was a variety of more specific objectives among them. For example, several webinars focused on the process of completing a grant application with the organization, while others were more theme-based and involved the host panelists talking and answering questions about particular health-related projects or experiences. The webinars selected for the present analysis consisted of all webinars that only had a “chat” option for audience members to ask questions to the hosts during the Q&A. Each webinar had one moderator and between two to six other foundation representatives, who included foundation officers as well as individuals from other organizations affiliated in some fashion with the foundation. In addition, there was an unknown number of audience member participants attending each event online. More detailed information on the data, method, and transcription conventions can be found in the [Forum Introduction](#).

Because the underlying interest for the study was in the moderator’s role during the Q&A interaction, the analysis focused on moderator talk in question-answer sequences. Each sequence was analyzed according to the principles of CA, which led to the discovery of a handful of moderator practices that were prevalent across the data. After a set of moderator practices had been identified, the data were then revisited to look for instances in which these practices were *not* used, which was done in order to consider how the unfolding of question-answer sequences might compare between the two circumstances. This paper will provide an analysis of one of these moderator practices, *respondent selection*. Three instances from three different webinars will be shown: the first two instances will show the practice of respondent selection being done by the moderator, and the third will show a sequence in which the practice is not done.

ANALYSIS

Respondent Selection in Post-Question Position

Extract 1 comes from a webinar that gives information on a call for grant proposals that the foundation is doing. As we join the interaction, the foundation representatives (FRs) have just

finished giving their presentation, and the moderator (MO) is opening up the Q&A session. The instance starts with the reading of the very first question from the audience.

Extract 1

04 MO: ↑let's just get right to them.
05 ((swallows))
06 the first questio:n .hh i:s, (0.2)
07 {{{(reading)}}-↑you ↑indicated this program spe↑cifically
08 targets funding ↓#research.#}=yes:.,=we \$did indicate
09 that many ↓#times\$#.
10 (.)
11 {{{(reading)}}-.HHH a:nd (.) >program or policy<
12 implementation is ↑not eligi↓ble.
13 (.)
14 so is <evalu↑atio:n of the implementation of
15 a program or policy (.) considered re↓search.>}
16 → .H ↑Nikki do you wanna elaborate on that a bit, hh.
17 (0.5)
18 FR: → sure. u::m (.) tch the ↑answer is the evaluation
19 of a- a- program or policy (.) ca:n be research,

After starting the Q&A session and announcing the impending arrival of the first question with her talk *the first question is*, in line 07, the moderator begins to read the audience member's question. The question begins with a summary of some information given during the earlier presentation, specifically the point that the grant being offered is limited to funding research. In line 08, the moderator suspends the reading of the question to give a parenthetical remark that agrees with the audience author's summation. After her side-comment, the moderator resumes reading the question (line 11), and continues for several lines. Ultimately, the audience participant is asking if, since the grant only funds research and not program or policy implementation, would research *on* program or policy implementation be eligible for funding. The moderator finishes reading the question in line 15, and then in line 16, she selects foundation representative Nikki by name to respond. After a 0.5 second gap, Nikki does an agreement token *sure* (line 18), acknowledging that she will take responsibility for answering the question. She then launches right into her response, which lets the audience know that projects looking at program or policy implementation *can* be research and therefore eligible, but she will go on to say this depends on factors such as how the project is designed.

Extract 1 provides a straightforward example of the moderator practice of respondent selection, and it represents what was discovered to be prevalent throughout the data. The principal component is found in line 16 wherein the use of a personal name in the moderator's first turn identifies an individual to do the second-turn response move in the sequence. In this instance, there is a smooth progression through the sequence—the moderator animates the audience question and then verbally selects a respondent, who quickly and adeptly moves into a response.

Respondent Selection in Pre-Question Position

While respondent selection was found frequently in the data, there was one notable variation among the instances. The practice could be done in a *post-question position*, or after the audience question has been read as seen in Extract 1, or in a *pre-question position*, as Extract 2 will demonstrate. This instance comes from a webinar similar to Extract 1 in which the foundation representatives have done a presentation on the grant proposal submission process. As the extract begins, a question-answer sequence has just been completed, and the moderator is moving on to a new question.

Extract 2

149 MO: → tch so the ↑next question hh. u:h let's
 150 → ↑turn back to you Nikki for this one, -t's
 151 a great question,
 152 (.)
 153 .H {((reading))-have ↑you considered referring
 154 projects to: program officers for other
 155 funding opportunities within the #foundation.#}
 156 (0.2)
 157 FR: → .hh u:h y- absolutely.=u:m >actually< our
 158 colleagues in the foundation ↑f:requently

Similar to the prior instance, the moderator in this example begins by announcing an impending question with her talk *the next question*, seemingly about to begin reading the next question. However, instead of launching into the question, she pauses with an outbreath and a hesitation marker *uh* in line 150 to do an insertion of a current-speaker-selects-next move with a personal name. This mid-TCU deployment of the respondent selection practice pre-selects Nikki as the individual who will be responsible for responding to the impending question. After characterizing the upcoming question as a *great* one and pausing slightly, the moderator finally begins to read in line 153. In this case, the audience member wants to know whether grant proposals could be passed along internally when there are other funding opportunities available. The moderator arrives at the end of the question in line 155. After a brief gap, in line 157 representative Nikki takes her turn, moving smoothly and easily into a response that lets the audience know that projects can absolutely be passed along for other funding opportunities.

Before moving on to the analysis of an instance in which the practice of respondent selection is *not* used, it is relevant to first make some summative comments about when it *is* used. As mentioned, this practice is notably prevalent across the data, and it is accomplished when the moderator uses one of the foundation representatives' personal names or, less frequently, the name of the institution these individuals represent, as a resource to do next speaker selection. As shown, respondent selection can occur in either a pre- or post-question position. However, the fronted pre-question position is more common in this data set.

The frequency of this practice in these data is interesting in light of prior research on speaker selection in interaction. In an analysis of next speaker selection in everyday multiparty interaction, Lerner (2003) pointed out "If one wants to direct a sequence-initiating action *unambiguously* [emphasis added] to a particular co-participant, then one can address that participant with a personal name or other address term" (p. 184). However, in his analysis, Lerner discovered that, while names and other explicit address terms were "arguably the

strongest forms of address available” (p. 184), this practice was not the most prevalent in his data. In fact, he stated these instances were “far from ubiquitous, even though their use is rather unconstrained in turn-constructive terms. In fact, they seem[ed] to be used primarily under specific circumstances in which they are deployed to do more than simply specify whom the speaker is addressing” (p. 184). The present analysis suggests that the use of address terms for next speaker selection may be more common in an audio-only, institutional, multiparty context like a webinar Q&A. One explanation for this distinction could be that most participants cannot see each other. While the data set does not include details that reveal whether foundation representatives are ever in the same room during the webinar recordings, there *is* evidence in the data that representatives are joining remotely. In Lerner’s study, gaze was quite commonly employed as a way of explicitly selecting a next speaker. However, if participants cannot see, and can only hear, each other, gaze is not an available resource for turn-taking. Using an explicit address term could therefore be an unambiguous way for the moderator to prescribe the next turn. Utilizing this practice, then, would align with the moderator’s job to facilitate and ensure clear and streamlined interaction during the Q&A because it provides a means to manage turn-taking and promote progressivity of the sequences.

In addition to providing clarity for the next speaker, this practice may also provide some clarity for the audience. Prior research examining question-answer sequences in other institutional settings such as courtrooms and news interviews (e.g., Atkinson, 1992; Heritage, 1985) has found that question askers in those contexts may employ distinct practices for the sake of an overhearing audience. In webinar interaction, the moderator’s use of representatives’ personal names or the name of their institution could reflect one way of explicating which *individual* at the institution, or which *institution* within the group of organizations attending, is responsible for the information connected with the question. This would be useful in this context since audience attendees may wish to contact foundation representatives after the webinar with follow-up questions.

Respondent Selection Absent

With the first two instances having shown the use of respondent selection and described some potential effects and benefits of the practice in context, the final instance will paint a picture of what might happen when the practice of respondent selection is *not* done. Extract 3 is from a webinar on some of the foundation’s global efforts related to health education. Two representatives, Cody and Kristoff, have been invited to share their experience with the audience. The instance begins as the moderator is closing one question-answer sequence down, and moving on to the next question.

Extract 3

| | | |
|-----|-----|--|
| 699 | MO: | .H thanks Cody, thanks Cody.=so:- (0.2) .HH |
| 700 | | so I lied earlier thi- th↑IS now will be our |
| 701 | | last \$question?\$ (0.2) .hh u::m uh <and it's |
| 702 | | a really interesting one which is |
| 703 | | {{(reading))- <u>h</u> ow do you: navigate issues of (0.2) |
| 704 | | intellectual <property.> (0.2) so either in |
| 705 | | terms of <u>f</u> ormal structures <related> to |
| 706 | | ownership of developed ↑ <u>o</u> utputs, (0.2) |

707 or more informal concerns of the
 708 appropriate attribu:tion of #innovations.#}
 709 (0.2) um I think a- a really interested topic.
 710 → =a:nd who- (.) whoever would like to start.
 711 (1.8)
 712 FR1: → [.hh yeah. we: can certainly (.) °uh-°]
 713 FR2: → [.hh I can provide ou:r general prov-]
 714 (0.2)
 715 FR1: → go [ahead.=Kristoff.]
 716 FR2: → [go ahead.=Cody?]
 717 (0.5)
 718 FR2: → [(syl syl)]
 719 FR1: → [<I'll just] say certainly deal with this as this
 720 is part of ou::r uh co-laboratory as I call it.
 721 =you remember we have thirty sites active

In line 699, the moderator echoes a *thank you* token with representative Cody's name, which functions as a sequence-closing third to complete the prior question-answer sequence. She then humorously claims to have lied, stating that the forthcoming question will in fact be the last one, and not the one she had given that status to earlier in the interaction. She characterizes the impending question as *interesting* (line 702) and then reads the question aloud (lines 703-708). This time, the audience member wants to know how the representatives deal with issues of intellectual property in their work. After doing the reading and again noting that the topic is interesting, in line 710, the moderator opens the floor for a response, directing the invitation to speak to *whoever*. Following a notable gap, in lines 712 and 713, both Cody and Kristoff begin to speak at precisely the same time, and then they both cut themselves off after a notable overlap. After a short gap (line 714), they both begin to speak again at the same time. This time they each try to resolve their inadvertent competition for the floor by selecting the other by name (lines 715 and 716). Following another gap, and yet another short overlap (lines 718 and 719), Kristoff relinquishes the floor, and Cody goes on to give his response to the audience question.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Widening the lens to now consider all three extracts, a few more things can be said about the moderator practice of respondent selection in audio-only webinars. Perhaps most notably, this practice seems to be a resource for moderators to manage and, more specifically, *facilitate* question-answer sequences in this context. Whereas the sequences in Extracts 1 and 2 unfold smoothly and without a hitch, a notable amount of trouble occurs in Extract 3 when the moderator does not use an explicit address term to select a specific representative to handle the upcoming question. Interestingly, we also see in Extract 3 that the two representatives actually resort to using each other's names in current-speaker-selects-next moves to try to get out of their jumble of overlap.

Given its prevalence in the data, as well as its seemingly consequential role in sequential development, the respondent selection practice seems to be part of the "procedural infrastructure" (Schegloff, 1992, p. 1338) of this particular type of webinar Q&A interaction—it

is a resource that is commonly employed in the turn-taking system to manage and arguably facilitate the transition from the first to the second turn, and it lends to the overall organization and, more crucially, the progressivity of the question-answer sequences. In contrast, when the practice is not employed and next-speaker selection is left up to the recipients, there seems to be more potential for trouble in the second pair part, which might occur in the form of overlap, long pauses, or other phenomena that could detract from the clarity and progression of the interaction.

The findings of this analysis may have some useful implications for institutions and individuals who host webinars. Perhaps most relevant to the effort to provide concrete evidence for certain best practices for webinar moderating, it appears that systematically using explicit talk and practices such as respondent selection is an effective way for moderators to guide recipients during Q&As, especially in an audio-only interaction. Not only might employing this practice help prevent trouble like overlap and therefore lend to the overall interactional quality of the webinar, but it could also implicitly give listeners information about whom they should contact with follow-up questions.

As mentioned, respondent selection can be done in either a pre- or post-question position, with the former being the position that is seemingly preferred by moderators in this context. The data do not shed much light on whether one position is any different from the other in terms of facilitating the second pair part of the sequence. However, it is possible that this position is preferable and potentially more beneficial for recipients because it allows for more preparedness on behalf of the representatives who will have to answer the questions. Schegloff (2007) has discussed the property of “pre-ness,” which he described as a free-floating property that can apply to talk located at any point in a turn. Pre-ness in talk provides a cue recipients can orient to which “has relevance to and bearing on some action or utterance projected to occur” (p. 44). Here, the fronting of the respondent selection move appears to enhance the pre-ness of the moderator talk in the first turn of the sequence—by pre-selecting the representative to respond prior to reading the question, the moderator gives that individual a hearable cue that the upcoming question is their responsibility. This could be advantageous in two ways. First, it could allow the representative more time to ready him or herself to answer the question. Second, knowing in advance that they will be the one to provide an answer, the representative may pay closer attention to the question as it is being read. In short, the greater degree of pre-ness afforded by this practice might enable moderators to help prepare other participants in the interaction for impending talk and action.

Finally, a more logistical suggestion arises from this analysis: practice. Much of the literature on best practices for webinars asserts that it is important for hosts to practice prior to going live with the event. This seems especially relevant for moderators. Since this individual is responsible for simultaneously managing multiple components of the interaction, doing a practice run with the other representatives can shed light on what works and what might result in confusion, especially in terms of how they do important tasks like pose the questions and facilitate management of the floor. More generally, practice can help all involved know what to expect *on an interactional level* before interacting live with the public.

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