

The End of the Expert

I've been invited to a panel discussion in my role as an expert, only this isn't the term they'll be using. The conference convenor explained that they're currently between words: *expert* is out, and they've yet to find a replacement. I was surprised, believing ideas and objects stepping-stoned labels at their convenience, graduating and post-graduating from word to word; that's what language did, and we loved it for that.

So I was flattered, but bothered. It seems unlikely that a thing could exist for too long without a label. It would be like a snail without a shell. Or an astronaut floating in space without a tether: how do you get them back?

You just move the space vehicle a bit closer, explained the convenor. If you really want it, you make the effort. With the snail: the shell's attached - it's part of the snail - so if it's missing then something very traumatic must have happened; there probably is no going back. Maybe you meant hermit crab?

Let me change the analogy: If you dropped your house keys down a drain then walked away - to get help - you wouldn't forget about the keys: the concept of *your house keys* would still exist, even if you didn't physically possess them. And one day you'd be reunited with the keys, or copies, or would have had a new lock put in and so have new keys. So you'd either have the original, a copy, or an entirely new set and yet they'd all be *your house keys*.

This seemed different, but at that moment I couldn't exactly say how, and so gave the appearance of not disagreeing.

Essay test question:

You are walking down the road and thinking a thought about a passerby which they then 'hear'. Does it mean that:

- they're telepathic and have tuned into your thoughts?

or

- *you're telepathic and have projected your thoughts?*

What are the shortest number of moves required to establish this, and what would those moves be? Or is sufficient information already present?

The convenor's assistant rang me a week later. As they were having a moratorium on 'the e word' it seemed in keeping to forgo listing all participants' qualifications. So the committee had decided: no letters after names or honorifics before. Just plain Mr or Ms - or neither, if preferred. No institutional memberships, societal affiliations or fellowships. Ditto for awards, titles or investitures. Just keep it plain and simple - was that okay by me?

I didn't think it was but the words which explained why would make me seem vain and insecure, and I didn't believe that the convenor's assistant was asking for my permission. Rather she was presenting me with the committee's decision, but with a question pinned on at the end. And this appended question was less about whether it would go ahead (which it would), more how I felt about it going ahead in this manner.

So I said I thought it was fine.

And, she went on, we're thinking of making this a thoroughly *sustainable* conference, so there'll be no physical hand-outs, printed timetables or catalogues. Everything will be electronic - which is exciting. We're even thinking of discouraging paper lecture notes.

Really? How?

By asking. It's like with plastic bags. Or smoking. Once you tell people something's no longer in favour, and give them an easy to remember reason, then they're quick to join in.

Does that include notes written on recycled paper, or the back of packets, packaging, scraps? Those too?

We're just thinking broadly at the moment. Are scraps sustainable - is anticipating scraps sustainable...? I don't know.

No?

No.
It's a bold idea.
Isn't it?

Notes for the news:

Extend and develop the intro music. Work around melodic themes, hooks and - possibly - refrains for repeatedly appearing characters. Make use of generic and transgeneric familiarity: go-getting uptempo numbers for 'on the move' characters, honky tonk piano for the comical/pantomimic etc. Broad strokes, but done with dignity.

Possibly infer connections through the use of particular instruments or families of instrument. These 'audio links' would help situate newcomers and reduce the need for (either dialogue led or narrated) exposition.

*This extended palette of **telling** through non-diegetic sound can be matched in the use of lighting, which is currently underdeveloped and flat. Explore the full potential of three and two point and single source lighting. Also, think more around positioning of lamps: why always from on high downwards? Consider bounce sources, reflectors, side and even ground level positioning.*

Similarly: the use of silhouette, or shadow. Or an older idea, but one due for a return: cookies. Position racks of branches, leaves, fake window frames or jail bars or blinds between the light and your subject - let the shadows break the lines, create an 'expression' of what's being said. Don't be afraid to let images burn out or have details lost in inky pools - it's the overall impression that's important and the exposure latitude of current cameras and domestic televisions can usually accommodate this. The 'broadcast standard' is not immutable - and the reduction of ambient light in living rooms is going to shift the parameters. How about we start the programme with a "now dim the lights..." instruction? Or a series of trailers in which a family gathers around a tv, flipping off the room lights to huddle before the glow?

Sound effects. Are they even being used at the moment? No. Enough said...

I memorise my principle and sub- points, devise an easy mnemonic to recall key data, and rehearse an introductory abstract. I know electronic devices are permitted but as I'll be there to *discuss*, then looking down at a screen to maintain my end of the conversation is going to seem lacking. A paper notebook can only contain what you've written in it before the event - it seems a reasonable reminding tool - but an electronic device is like carrying around a library, which you're maybe combing through for answers to questions you've never even considered before. Which isn't a bad thing to do - it's how you become an expert, really - but sitting on a stage in front of a live audience seems like the wrong place to be doing this.

The days pass in week then month sized blocks, but with no more words about the conference. I try contacting the convenor and her assistant, but their phones just ring then ring some more, and I can't find any information online. I wonder whether maybe the committee had decided to do away with even more words, discarding them before new ones had grown in place, and had got to a point where things had stopped making sense - or at least conference sense?

Perhaps

It may be

It could be

It's possible

For all one knows

Or maybe they just lost their funding.