A peer session primer

What is a peer session?
Peer sessions are the core events at a peer conference. They provide a flexible, yet somewhat structured, method for conferees to share experience and expertise on subjects of mutual interest. *Attendees determine topics for peer sessions* during the first day of the conference. The typical peer session has five to fifteen participants and lasts around an hour. Peer sessions are often discussion centered, but sometimes a presentation or panel format is more appropriate. You'll be able to tell what's going to work for you.

How do I know that a peer session will provide useful information to me?
Experience has shown that for a peer session to work well, it's important that there be one or more participants who have some knowledge or experience in the topic chosen. Occasionally, no expertise is available, and the peer session becomes a disappointment to all involved. Obviously, there are no guarantees that every peer session will be a success. *You can help! If you have expertise in or experience with a peer session's topic, please consider volunteering to facilitate, or participate. Our conference will work best when we support each other.*

Who runs a peer session?
Each peer session needs a *facilitator* and a *scribe*.

Ideally the facilitator has some knowledge or experience of the topic, though this is not required. The facilitator is responsible for finding a scribe if no one has yet volunteered, keeping the group focused on the topic, ensuring the session runs smoothly, and making sure that all present have an appropriate chance to contribute and ask questions.

The scribe is responsible for creating a list of attendees and a summary of the meeting in computer readable form. It's important to take notes during the meeting, since experience has shown that memories quickly fade. Resources mentioned at the session should be noted in the summary. Please give the summary to the conference coordinator *before* the conference is over!

How are peer session topics, facilitators, and scribes chosen?
You *choose peer session topics!* On the first day of the conference you'll be told the location of the *topic signup sheets*. First you'll be given time to propose possible peer session topics. Add as many as you want as headings on the blank topic sheets. When everyone has proposed topics you'll be invited to the topic boards again. You may see topics that interest you. If so, add your name to the list under the topic description. Sign up for as many topics as interest you. Indicate your level of interest in the topic by writing the number **1**—low interest, **2**—medium interest, or **3**—high interest next to your name. In addition, place an:

(**F**) next to your name to indicate you'd be willing to facilitate the session.
(**E**) next to your name to indicate you have some expertise on or experience with the peer session's topic.
(**P**) next to your name if you're willing to be a presenter or panelist.
(**S**) next to your name to indicate you'd be prepared to scribe.

If you have some facilitation experience, or knowledge or expertise in the peer session's topic, please consider volunteering as a facilitator for the group. Multiple offers of facilitation in a group are very helpful to the steering committee when determining the final peer sessions, because sometimes a schedule conflict prevents volunteers from facilitating. We greatly appreciate offers to scribe for peer sessions, and do our best to share the scribing load.

Once topic sheets are complete, a small group of attendees will pick dominant topics (sometimes combining several themes), find facilitators and scribes, and schedule peer session tracks so that two potentially conflicting groups don't meet at the same time. Feel free to volunteer to help with this process, which leads to a set of peer sessions well tuned to conferees' needs.

Peer session facilitation

What's involved in facilitating a peer session
Each peer session needs a *facilitator*.

Ideally the facilitator has some knowledge or experience of the topic, *but this is not required*. The facilitator is responsible for finding a scribe if no one has yet volunteered, keeping the group focused on the topic, ensuring the group runs smoothly, and making sure that everyone has an appropriate chance to contribute and ask questions.

Peer session facilitation—step by step

- Start on time.
- Make sure there's a scribe for the peer session; ask for a volunteer if no one has yet volunteered.
- Title and circulate the peer session attendance sheet so the scribe can then record who is present.
- If the peer session is a presentation or panel, have the presenter(s) [which may be you] go ahead, and moderate subsequent questions and discussion.
- If a presentation format isn't appropriate (this is generally the case):
    - use a *quick* go-round the group (30-60 seconds per person) to home in on what group members want to discuss, and any relevant experience they possess.
    - briefly summarize the go-round and get a quick consensus on what will be discussed.
    - moderate the ensuing discussion.
- End on time.

Peer session facilitation—tips
Facilitation is an art not a science. Here are some tips that may help you.

- Keep a go-round short! Don't spend more than 25% of your time on a go-round.
- Note the themes brought up in the go-round and make time for each of them as appropriate.
- Have your scribe or another volunteer use a classroom whiteboard or flip chart to keep track of ideas if necessary.
- Model the way you'd like to see the group interact. People will follow your lead.
- Keep the peer session on-topic. If the topic wanders, check to see if the group wants to go there.
- If you have contributions to the group discussion, that's fine. But be careful: as facilitator it's easy to monopolize the conversation.
- Don't allow people to monopolize the discussion. Ensure all who wish to contribute can. It's OK to gently interrupt someone who's talking too much – that's your job!
- Encourage participation. Watch for quiet attendees and check if they have something to say or questions to ask.