An 'Age of Conferencing?'

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Abstract

This chapter will discuss some of the reasons behind the current flourishing of academic conferences as a social phenomenon, the related nomenclature, and their importance in establishing an academic identity or presence. We will also look at the typical structure of a conference and offer some pre-conference considerations for both presenters and general participants.

Conferences are ubiquitous these days. Among the academic conferences I noted in a recent online browse were the Comic Arts Conference (pop culture is an ever-expanding source of conference themes), the Catholic Conference on Geocentrism (a niche conference dedicated to the notion that the sun revolves around the earth), and the International Conference on Prostitution (academic analyses of social phenomena constitute a growing proportion of conference topics). As I write this, just down the hall from my office, there is a poster announcing the International Congress on Rabbit Biotechnology.

Why the burgeoning conference scene? One reason is that the advent of low-cost carriers has made flying cheaper and often more convenient, opening up not only new locales for business travel but also increasing budgetary opportunities to do so. Almost every city of note worldwide has at least one elaborate structure built explicitly as a conference center. Some sites are so popular that advance reservation requirements of over three years are not unusual.

The increased specialization found in almost all academic research fields is another contributor to the conference phenomenon. As areas of research interest narrow, the number of research areas increases. Naturally, practitioners prefer to meet, and engage with, other practitioners in their specialist fields, particularly as new areas of shared interest and value emerge. The result? More conferences.

Providing research allowances that include attending conferences has always been a mainstay of academic budgeting, but as many travel costs decrease and the number of significant events increase, not only attending conferences but also

presenting or otherwise playing an active role in the proceedings has become integral parts of any academic or researcher's professional life. Many budgets are now set accordingly, recognizing the opportunities for collaboration and the expansion of knowledge and ideas that conferences can provide. In most academic fields, researchers and practitioners simply cannot afford to fall behind the knowledge curve, making conferences indispensable as central to the dissemination and fertilization of new ideas and practices.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon the novice researcher and/or academic to wet their feet in these expanding discourses. Not only being physically present but also to be productive at conferences is quickly becoming a required quality of academia. However, first perhaps, we need to make some terminological distinctions.

First, how is a conference different from a 'convention' or a 'congress'? In fact, many of the contents do overlap, as all three aim to bring together specialists and advocates for a series of intensive knowledge and idea-sharing events at a set time and place.

Conferences, however, do tend to emphasize the academic aspect of the gathering, with a particular emphasis upon presentations, from plenary speeches by field notables and academic celebrities to standard parallel or FP/PS sessions given by rank-and-file members. Conventions, on the other hand, tend to revolve more around core special exhibitions and related events (hence their reputations of exuding a bit more of a 'party' atmosphere). Congresses tend to be slightly more political in purpose, the core events leaning more toward the establishing of polity or other organizational matters. Further confusing the nomenclature is the term 'forum,' which generally indicates that the event will be more discussion-based.

While all four of the events described above will generally include all of the above qualities, it is the degree to which certain activities constitute the core items that ultimately marks the difference. This book, as the title implies, will concentrate upon conferences, given their greater academic orientation and related demands for active participation among those in academic fields. As the number of conferences proliferate so does the need to recognize, analyze, and understand them as a social phenomenon, with this book aiming to describe the uses of English (the lingua franca of over 95% of all conferences worldwide) as it is used or is expected to be used within these settings.

2.1 The Structure of a Conference

Conference preparation begins well in advance of the event itself with the initial planning, the establishment of a theme or themes by the steering committee, the call for papers, invitations and announcements made to special speakers, followed by the vetting of presentations proposals, submissions of proceedings manuscripts, and the arrangement of presentation categories, slots, times, and rooms, registration and

payment, and ongoing communication with delegates and attendees. The vast majority of this type of extra-textual, extraneous discourse lies outside the intended scope of this book.

What the novice conference attendee will be more concerned with, however, will be his or her choice of conference—assuming that this choice has not been made by a superior. Obviously expense, geography, prestige, and the field or academic/research scope covered by the conference will be major factors in making a decision, not to mention that conferences held in intriguing locales such as Barcelona or Bali tend to attract a greater number of attendees because, well, because they are Barcelona and Bali.

Outside of these obvious factors, the actual venue location should be considered. More scientific conferences tend to take place in established conference centers, whereas humanities conferences will more often be hosted on university campuses, utilizing existing classrooms and lecture halls. Hotel conference' facilities account for most of the rest.

Obviously, the rental of large conference centers and the hiring of assistance staff (which are the best venues for those fields that require more elaborate exhibition and demonstration areas, including trade shows and product displays) and hotel facilities is passed on to the attendee. Medical conference fees I have attended over the past several years (largely to research this book) have ranged from $400 US to $850, even as a non-licensed non-medical participant, and even when prominent pharmaceutical conferences were sponsoring the proceedings.

On the other hand, the costs for conferences hosted on university campuses require much less overhead (depending, to some degree, on the largesse of university officials) and often utilize more volunteer workers. More humanities conferences, often less well-funded, select this option, as it reduces costs for both hosts and attendees. In my experience, conferences hosted at universities or similar public facilities will often cost under $250 US (with many being under $100, or even free).

I have presented at conferences in venues that include everything from non-air-conditioned, unlit, decaying high school classrooms in developing countries, to comfortable but utilitarian university lecture rooms, through luxury hotel wedding banquet halls (complete with wait staff constantly entering and exiting to remove or replace cutlery and glassware), and sleek, all the way to state-of-the-art multimedia conference center presentation halls. Yes, the venue too can affect your enjoyment of, and productivity at, an academic conference.

What novice attendees should be careful of, however, is the increasing number of dubious or 'predatory' conferences, often held in posh and prestigious venues, that have little academic value and are designed largely to produce a profit for non-academically affiliated organizers. Often invitations to attend these arrive as unbidden emails linked to very attractive professionally designed websites, often citing prominent—and well paid—guest speakers, as means of legitimizing themselves.

Hints of the stature of the conference may be noted in conference titles, themes, and history. If the host organization is an established and widely recognized academic organization, if the organizing committee is explicitly named and is made up

of specialists in the academic field, if the conference has a substantial past history, if the themes and disciplines are specific and narrow (overly general, vague titles such as 'The Conference for Research in the Humanities' would generally be a giveaway that this is a dubious conference—particularly if 'The Conference For Scientific Advancement' is being held concurrently, under the same umbrella organization, right next door), if the registration fees seem reasonable, and if the supporting organizations are also well-established and legitimate, then one could expect that the conference itself is also legitimate.

Novice attendees and participants may also want to check previously published online proceedings and programs to gauge the scope and/or quality of previous presentations in order to establish priority, prestige, and suitability for attendance or participation. One red flag to note is if it appears that every proposal was accepted even though many of them seem amateurish and/or well outside the advertised research area.

Only on one occasion have I unwittingly participated in such a predatory conference, duped by an alleged association with a prestigious university that actually had little connection with the event. Organizers appeared to have little or no academic knowledge of the field and, more importantly, did not seem to care much about it. My presentation room was a hotel ballroom with terrible acoustics, with speaking areas partitioned from other speakers by a removable screen. The audience were seated at round meal tables covered with china and cutlery, hardly conducive to the dissemination of academic discourse. I was also strongly pressured to publish my associated paper in the associated conference proceedings that required a hefty extra publishing fee. I declined. And for all this, the cost of registration was twice that of most humanities conferences. Buyer beware.

2.2 Pre-conference Considerations

When choosing a conference, balancing the choice between a highly prestigious conference with a lower success rate of presentation applicants, and a less prestigious affair but one with a higher acceptance rate, can be a dilemma for those new to the arena. My suggestion would be at first to attend a major conference without the intention of presenting, simply to become accustomed to the focus, level, and quality of research presented, as well as to observe and absorb the manner in which the sharing of ideas and knowledge, the discourse of academic and professional interactions, is actually carried out. Hopefully, this book will help in that endeavor.

But if you plan to present, your first priority will be the submitting of your abstract. There are numerous resources available describing how to write an attractive presentation abstract, one that will catch the attention of the organizing committee. Since this book focuses on conference speech, the skill of abstract writing will not be discussed in depth here, except to say that unless the abstract is clear, well-organized, relates to the conference theme or topic, and contains a

suitable academic or professional tenor, the chances of acceptance will be greatly reduced.

Conformity to stated conference themes is another matter worth considering when submitting an abstract. While some conferences adopt very vague or general themes and therefore do not pay much attention to whether individual applicants have addressed the theme in their abstracts, others do explicitly hope or expect that prospective presenters will in some way address the theme, occasionally to the point of making adherence to the theme an element of the vetting process. Generally speaking, annual international conferences hosted by large academic organizations are less concerned with adherence to themes, whereas smaller, specialized affairs will tend to be more insistent upon applicants addressing the stated theme.

A sample of typical considerations regarding CP abstract submissions includes the advice presented in Table 2.1 below:

Of the items noted in Table 2.1, the novelty aspect of the research is the only likely factor that can trump a poorly written abstract. However, if/when the abstract is accepted, there are several considerations that the novice attendee should observe:

a. *Do* follow any and all instructions regarding registration, payment, uploading of papers, revisions of abstracts, uploading of presentation slides, and equipment announcements to a T—*efficiently and promptly*. This will not only allow conference organizers to breathe more easily but will also allow you to focus more upon developing your own CP. Check and update your participant status regularly.

Table 2.1 Considerations for conference presentation abstracts (reproduced courtesy of EALTHY, www.ealthy.com)

It should be clear from your abstract of 150 words that:
1. You have something new to say or that you plan to shed new light on a topic
2. You have respected the level of knowledge of your audience
3. Your session is of practical use for delegates. If your talk is mainly theoretical, include consideration of the practical issues and implications that it raises
4. Your audience can apply your experience to their own context. This is especially important if you are describing a course, project, or product, or if your presentation relies heavily on a description of your local situation
5. If your session is based on research, you should report either on a completed study or on a significant phase that has been completed, rather than discuss general issues
6. If your session is a 60-min workshop, it must include active audience participation
7. If referring to a publication (print or online), you must include the title in the abstract
8. Your abstract should accurately reflect what you are going to talk about

b. Plan to attend a variety of sessions. By perusing the program, many of these can be decided in advance. Observe a plenary speech, a keynote speaker, sit in on a symposium (a theme-based discussion, often highly interactive with multiple expert speakers), attend a workshop, support peer presentations, and try to hear what others from various national, regional, or research backgrounds have to say in your own special area of interest.

c. Prepare to establish connections and possible research collaborations with other attendees. Special study and interest groups tend to hold discussion sessions at conferences. Attend one. Founding future collaborations with like-minded peers is perhaps the most fruitful benefit of conference attendance. Several of my ongoing academic endeavors (and even long-term friendships) have resulted from chance meetings at conferences.

d. Finally, do be prepared to talk about your current institution and academic or research interests with others, not necessarily as a formal presentation but as a result of impromptu meetings and extraneous interactions during lunches, refreshment breaks, and post-session chitchat. You *will* be asked. Those who are prepared to give a quick outline of their current interests and areas of investigation are more likely to establish new and meaningful relations, and in doing so extend or expand their academic and professional lives.

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 2

1. Explain two ways in which can one distinguish between established academic conferences and those that aim largely for profit.
2. What are the main functional differences between a conference, a convention, and a congress?
3. Beyond giving and/or listening to CPs, list four other interactive conference features or events.
4. List three things a novice conference attendee should do in advance of the conference.
5. What are four major considerations that a prospective presenter should consider when submitting an abstract?