Surviving the conference marathon
July 10, 2019 by Thesis Whisperer

This post is by Dr Imogen Wegman, a project officer at the University of Tasmania. Her research is cross-disciplinary, and she might attend a digital humanities conference, a history seminar and a GIS symposium within a month. Imogen is also a co-founder and organiser of Hobart’s monthly public history event ‘A Pint of History’. As a dedicated ambivalent, she swings between loving and hating people, and has had to learn her limits.

So, you’ve found the call for papers, and submitted an abstract, been accepted, got your faculty funding or organised some extra shifts to get the cash, registered, booked travel and a lovely/scummy room, and decided which shoes will make your presentation really pop.

My first conference outside my university was a big one at a big university in a big city. I was eighteen months into my PhD, and while I’d presented my research to colleagues, this was new territory. Over the next week I fumbled my way through small-talk with professors and an overwhelming schedule but in the end I was still alive to tell the tale. Since then, I’ve attended conferences around the world and continued to learn not only how to survive, but to thrive in what can seem like a terrifying environment. Your supervisor should be able to help you write an abstract and paper, I want to help you prepare for the social aspect of conferences.

1. Find the twitter hashtag

Live-tweeting was an emerging artform at my first conference, but I remember the excitement of finding the hashtag, and then being invited to a catch up of #twitterstorians. Although I knew almost no one, I knew that at morning tea on the first day I would have some people to talk to.

Not all conferences will be active on Twitter, or you may not use the platform, but it can be an excellent icebreaker. The same conference now blows up on Twitter with an entire sub-network of tweeters live-tweeting talks and organising unofficial social events. Introducing yourself as ‘we’ve never met, but we follow each other on Twitter’ can be quite normal in the academic world. Levels of engagement with Twitter differ between disciplines, but it can open up an international network of advice, encouragement and collaboration. Conference hashtags are a useful introduction into this world.

2. Find the solo people at morning tea

Lots of people go to conferences without knowing anyone there. Everyone quickly makes some contacts, so when you talk to one person, they’ll then introduce you as the conversation circle grows. This is networking –
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meeting one person who introduces you to two others who invite you to the end of day drinks. It might not end up with plans to collaborate on the Next Big Thing, but you will find acquaintances and hopefully even new
friends. Take along some business cards so you can swap details quickly.
As time goes on, you'll build up networks and spend time catching up, but
you have to start somewhere.

If you don’t know where to start, look for people standing alone with their
cup of caffeine and (this is the important part) go and talk to them. Start
with an introduction, and ask some questions about where they are based
and their field of research.

If you are an old hand with lots of friends and colleagues, be kind and
generous to the solo attendees. Remember that you once stood timidly in
the corner, nibbling a sandwich with feigned nonchalance as you scoured
the room for just one person you felt brave enough to talk to. Offer a
friendly branch but (and this should go without saying) don’t force it on
them.

3. Prepare some small talk questions for awkward chitchat
moments

Sometimes you’ll feel obliged to make small talk with your neighbour in
the lunch queue, who will turn out to be a very significant academic. If
your early career imposter syndrome is anything like mine, you may
freeze and forget all sensible questions and hear yourself asking about
their favourite Muppet. Instead, ask them about their career – “how did
you come to be working in this area?” I (almost) guarantee they’ll have a
tale of research twists and turns as they navigated the academic
quagmire, whether that’s been for fifty or five years.

4. Take a break

Conferences can be hectic: a packed program of talks, plus a formal
dinner, a conference excursion, and all the pub visits…uh… informal
networking opportunities at the end of each day. For extroverts this can be
invigorating, but for many people conferences can be exhausting. All the
brilliant talks leads to content overload, while you also try to keep a
professional face and remember all the names of people you meet.

Learning to recognise when our brains are going into shutdown and need
some quiet time is a useful life-skill. My symptoms include concentration
levels down 80%, a struggle to stay awake, and the growing conviction
that my seat is actually trying to kill me.

At the beginning of the conference, highlight the unmissable talks in your
program, and add to that as you meet interesting individuals and promise
to attend their paper. And then, when your concentration is dipping, find a
session you can skip. It is perfectly fine to step back and take that hour to
refresh. Take a walk, a nap, go to the venue museum. You’ll notice the
improvement when you return to the next session. Likewise, don’t feel
guilty if you skip some drinks or a dinner. It’s true, connections are made
and people are met at these events, but if you’re a mental wreck you
won’t be able to make the most of that anyway.

5. Keep hydrated

Finally, drink lots of water. You’ll be eating too many small sandwiches,
and drinking terrible conference tea/coffee, and possibly more alcohol/soft
drinks than usual. I know this is what our mums tell us, but keep up the
water levels. Dehydration will make you feel gross, and your concentration
will go down. So fill up that conference water bottle, or pack your own, and
try to empty it a couple of times each day.
And with those tips, you are ready to go and make the new conference friends who are waiting out there for you! I'm always keen to pick up new skills, how do you navigate conferences?

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2 thoughts on “Surviving the conference marathon”

Jason Clark says:
July 10, 2019 at 8:00 am

On Tue, 9 Jul 2019 at 19:12, The Thesis Whisperer wrote:

> Thesis Whisperer posted: "This post is by Dr Imogen Wegman, a project > officer at the University of Tasmania. Her research is cross-disciplinary. > and she might attend a digital humanities conference, a history seminar and > a GIS symposium within a month. Imogen is also a co-founder " >

Reply

Tom Worthington says:
July 10, 2019 at 9:16 am

Excellent tips on surviving a conference. One extra: stay local. If there is accommodation in the conference venue, and you can afford it, stay there. That way you can nip back to your room for a few minutes lie down, or to get the laptop charger. If on a tight budget (as I usually am), find a cheap hotel nearby. If the conference is at a university, stay in the student accommodation. I once got a whole top floor of a student tower block to myself, with balcony and views out over Vancouver Harbor.


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