

Composing Conferences

Exploring Alternatives to the Traditional Conference Format

Special Issue of *Constructivist Foundations* to be published November 2015

Guest editors: Michael Hohl and Ben Sweeting

Expressions of interest due: Monday 17 November 2014

Submission deadline for full paper submissions: Friday 6 March 2015

Send all material to: [composing/at/constructivistfoundations.info](mailto:composing@constructivistfoundations.info)

More details at <http://tinyurl.com/cf-composing>

The goal for this special issue is to explore constructivist alternatives to the conventional paper presentation format of academic conferences. How can a conference be organised so that it can be an active place of questioning and exchange where new research questions can be composed and addressed? How can exploratory conversations be central rather than peripheral to the programme? In what ways do constructivist approaches to fields such as education or science also suggest possible rethinkings of academic practices more generally?

Conventionally, conference participants take it in turn to present their research findings by “reading” their paper followed by a short period of questions, a format established by the Royal Society of London in the 1660s. While there are significant precedents for more discursive conferences (see, for instance, Bateson 2004; Pias 2003-2004), the paper delivery model remains dominant.

As second-order cyberneticians and constructivists such as Ranulph Glanville (2011) and Gordon Pask (1979) have pointed out, this traditional conference design has many practical shortcomings:

- The conference timetable is tightly constrained and there is little room for flexibility or improvisation in response to questions raised.
- Discussions are minimised and formalised, meaning that the most significant moments of exchange are often squeezed into coffee breaks.
- The formality of presentation, and the necessity to often submit papers to proceedings in advance (so that they are more like “precedings”), means that much of the opportunity to learn from feedback on the paper during the presentation is missed.
- Papers are often presented in parallel sessions, meaning each participant misses more than they attend, with little opportunity to communicate between sessions. Some participants do little more than attend the session in which they present.

From a constructivist point of view, these shortcomings are not just practical but also epistemological and can be thought of in similar terms to Peter Medawar's (1963) criticisms of the scientific paper as being misleading about the nature of the process of scientific research. The predominantly one-way and predetermined format of the paper presentation is in contrast with constructivist approaches in other contexts, such as education:

- The predominantly one-way format implies a realist epistemology by giving authority to the speaker, even in the questions that follow the presentation.
- Possibilities for exchange between participants and also between disciplines are obstructed by minimising the sort of conversations that help each to learn about and from the other, which is the point of the conference.
- The traditional conference reports findings that are not questionable and so does not, in itself, move the subject forward. It is not about learning or exploring but reporting on research already conducted and affirming already established knowledge.

We invite reflections by *participants in and organisers of* conferences that have used alternative formats, such as conversational structures or other constructivist inspired approaches, in whole or part. Contributors to the special issue are invited to address the following themes:

- **Conversation:** In what ways might a conference be organised as an environment conducive to conversation, in line with Ernst von Glasersfeld's (1992) remarks on constructivist education, and so to learning, research, questioning and the collaborative construction of new ideas? What might be a suitable balance between structure and freedom in such a conference?
- **Exchange:** In what ways can conference format help or hinder interdisciplinary exchange? How might alternative conference formats be useful to researchers or practitioners from different backgrounds?
- **Performance:** What is the role of performing, acting, improvising and experimenting as part of the conference? When can the form of a conference be an enactment of its questions, helping us to explore ideas by acting them out? In what ways can the way we act in a conference help us to explore and learn, leading to new understanding that, in turn, can lead to new forms of practice?
- **Research:** In what ways can a conference be a place of active research, where new research questions are composed and explored, instead of the presentation of research already conducted? How can alternative conference formats not just be reconciled with the need for peer review and publication but also an enrichment and enhancement of them?

Article Submissions

If you are interested in contributing to the issue, please let us know in your expressions of interest whether you intend to submit a scholarly paper and/or whether you want to contribute to the critical discussion of the accepted papers with an Open Peer Commentary (OPC).

Expressions of interest should reach us by 17 November 2014. If you propose submitting a paper, provide us with a short abstract of the topic you intend to write about. Submission of the full paper (in English) is due 6 March 2015. It is followed by a *double-blind review* that all submitted papers must undergo, including invited contributions. In the case of conditional acceptance, time will be allocated for the revisions requested. **Paper submissions should not exceed 9000 words, commentaries about 2000 words.** The special issue will be published in the November 2015 issue of *Constructivist Foundations*.

Guidelines and templates

Please follow the guidelines at
<http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/journal/guidelines>

If possible, use the Word template for full papers at <http://tinyurl.com/cf-template> and for OPCs at <http://tinyurl.com/cf-commentary>

Contact

Declarations of interests, paper submissions, and all further inquiries should be sent to the editors at **[composing/at/constructivistfoundations.info](mailto:composing@constructivistfoundations.info)**

For further information please access the website: <http://tinyurl.com/cf-composing>

Timetable

- 17 November 2014: Expressions of interest
- 6 March 2015: Submission deadline for full papers
- 17 April 2015: Peer-review feedback returned to authors
- 15 May 2015: Revised paper submission
- 17 July 2015: Final paper submission, papers sent to Open Peer
Commentary authors
- 21 August 2015: Submission deadline for Open Peer Commentaries (OPCs)
- 11 September 2015: Final OPC submission, papers sent to paper authors for
response
- 16 October 2015: Author's response to OPCs due
- 15 November 2015: Publication date

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