

***Getting the most out of the
“PAPER PRESENTING EXPERIENCE”***

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7 TOP TIPS

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INTRODUCTION

The AESOP Young Academics Network (YAN), a working group of the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP), aims to help younger academics to progress through their early stages of academic life and establish themselves as planning researchers. The YAN is organising a series of activities, like the YA annual Conference (Bratislava, 2007; St. Petersburg, 2008; Vienna, 2009), social events for young academics at a number of AESOP events (Ph.D. Workshop, AESOP Congresses, e.g.) and arrange Special Sessions, like Roundtables at the annual AESOP Congresses, which aim to help their membership in addressing the barriers that they face in establishing themselves.

Every year's Roundtable has a thematic focus on an area where young academics may encounter problems in seeking to become established researchers, such as in *getting papers published* or *applying for permanent jobs*. The Roundtables typically have six or seven speakers comprising a mix of former young academics as well as more established names in the world of planning. Each speaker gives a short presentation on one aspect of that particular issue, and then there is a discussion with the audience which tends to be drawn from the student delegates at the conference.

In 2008, the AESOP Congress was held, jointly with the American Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP), in Chicago, following a very successful event four years previously in Oxford, UK. The AESOP/ACSP planning committee agreed to provide YAN with a 'slot' in the conference programme for their conference roundtable, and it was agreed that this would cover the topic 'Getting the most out of the paper presenting experience'. The Roundtable took place on Wednesday 9th July (9.45am-11.15am) to a packed breakout room, with seven very engaging presentations and a very lively discussion with student delegates from both the AESOP and ACSP 'wings' of the conference.

It was sitting room only at the 2008 AESOP Young Academics Network Roundtable



The seven speakers who presented at the roundtable were:

- Sigmund Asmervik, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Norway
- Michael Hebbert, Manchester University, UK
- Petra Hirschler, Vienna University of Technology, Austria
- David Prospero, Florida Atlantic University, USA
- David Shaw, University of Liverpool, UK
- Roelof Verhage, University of Lyon 2, France
- Jochem de Vries, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

The Roundtable panel share their collective wisdom with the audience



This report has been prepared as a summary and synthesis of what was said at that roundtable. It has been prepared by members of the YAN Co-ordinating team (Paul Benneworth, Newcastle University, and Beatrix Haselsberger, Vienna University of Technology) as a resource for attendees at the session as well as other young academics. The report has been structured around the seven main themes which emerged in all the speakers' presentations. We are very grateful to all the speakers for the participation in the event, and their permission to use their contributions for the development of this guide to conference attendance for the young academics.

*Paul Benneworth & Beatrix Haselsberger
YAN Co-ordinating Team
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TIP 1: THE CONFERENCE IS A STEP ON THE JOURNEY FROM RESEARCH INTO PUBLICATION

Giving a paper at a conference is all about the process of translating an interesting research question into a finished paper ready for publication. By the time of the conference paper, the research will be underway and empirical activities and analysis may also be incomplete. The conference is an opportunity to shape the progress of the ideas into a finished research article, and so it is important to bear in mind the future steps you wish to take with your research in using the conference for your own ends.

A research article is a piece of scientific writing in which a question is posed, derived from theoretical and empirical inconsistencies, and explored to provide a deeper insight into theoretical and practical understanding. Because a conference paper is intended to lead to a scientific publication, it is important that the paper is grounded in a theoretical framework and does not merely describe a phenomenon. More generally, the paper must convey a POINT, a PROBLEM or a CHALLENGE within it, and it is that which makes it interesting.

The timing of a conference may occur at a variety of different points in the research process. Although as a Ph.D. researcher you will normally be some way through the project by the time you present your first paper. However this not necessarily has to be the case. You may be at a very early stage in the process, in which you may wish to present an overview of the literature. There may have been problems in the fieldwork, in which case you might wish to explore what are the implications of non-responses for the theory. Different stages in the research cycle have different points of interest and problems, and the focus of the paper should vary to reflect this point in the process.

The progress of a piece of research into print through a conference is not an individual isolated process. There are many things that can be done at conferences that will make the subsequent steps easier to take. You can ask people to read the paper through in detail and provide comments on what you have written. You may encounter people working on similar problems that you can compare your own research with. You may meet people using other datasets or in future case study areas who may be able to help you set up a future empirical project element. You may meet journal editors and publishers who can give you guidance on getting your work into print.

The process from research into publication is a long and slow process, with few shortcuts. One of the greatest hurdles in this journey is in responding to criticism. Most worthwhile journals use peer review in some form, inviting other academics to review your paper and then requiring you to respond before the paper can be published. This can be a bruising process, but a conference can help to make this as constructive as possible. The comments you get from the audience can help you to identify and address the 'bear-traps' in your articles that might be picked up by reviewers. Throughout the conference, you can also see other perspectives and discourses, understanding what make people tick and understanding the kinds of criticism and critique this might lead to through the peer review process.

TIP 2: THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS 'A CONFERENCE'

The YA Roundtable took place at a quite unique event, a joint meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) and the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP), held only once every four years. However, every conference is in its own way unique, in terms of the communities that attend the practical arrangements, the opportunities for discussion and their openness to people at the edge of their disciplines. Correctly selecting the right conference for your own needs is vitally important, whether those needs are translating your Ph.D. into journal articles, in progressing from student into self-standing academic, or identifying the disciplinary community best aligned to your intellectual interests.

What kind of conference you choose depends on what you hope to achieve – conferences like the annual AESOP or ACSP congresses are very large and sometimes quite impersonal, and so can have the effect of 'reading the paper into the record'. Conversely, symposia and seminars, like the YA meetings, are much smaller, and everyone may read each others' paper to ensure an effective discussion during the event. Smaller events are better for those who are seeking more detailed feedback on their work, but they require much more preparation, because it is often necessary to prepare a full paper prior to the event. Conversely, larger events can be good if you feel that you are at the margins of that discipline as it increases the chances that you will be able to find other people that are able to intelligently comment on your work, and whose own work you find interesting.

Figure 1 AESOP-YAN Prize winners presenting to the AESOP President Peter Ache



Each conference has its own characteristics, organisation and rhythms, and learning these is important to getting the most out of the whole experience. A conference is in some ways like a club, and learning the rules and the committee is very important. Take some time to observe what is going on, who is important, and why they are important. There are networks within conferences as well, and these loose networks can be important for being successful at conferences. There may be fringe activities, and these may not be open to all participants, so if you want to get the most out of a conference then it is important that you are comfortable with these characteristics, and they create an environment within which you can thrive.

Because there are many different conferences, it is perfectly possible to give a paper to a range of different conferences. What is important is to make sure that each conference experience retains its value, because of the time commitment that conferences can take up. This means that different versions of one paper can be presented to different audiences, reflecting differences in conference themes or different theoretical perspectives. It is important that if you give a paper again, that you are doing three things 'refine, refresh and redevelop'.

A conference is an experience that extends beyond an individual's 15 minute presentation, the tracks and the formal paper sessions. The value of a conference to you is in the value of that experience as a whole. The value of a conference experience can lie not only in getting a good feedback, or hearing interesting papers, but also things like the potential to meet interesting people, or to get into contact with editors and more established members of the discipline. It is important to be clear about what you want to achieve from a conference and to frame its value to you as the value of the whole experience, and not just the 15 minute slot, which as a young academic, is often first thing in the morning of the last day!

TIP 3: A PAPER IS NOT THE SAME AS A PRESENTATION

It is fairly common to elide between two different things when talking about conferences. We say 'we give a paper', and by this we mean we

- give a presentation,
- often 15 minutes long,
 - to people who don't know our work,
- giving enough of an insight into what we are doing
- so they have something useful to say in response.

But behind that presentation, we might also have written a formal paper that might be pre-circulated or available at the conference. It is vitally important not to confuse the two very distinct activities, because they fulfil two very different roles. Giving a good paper relies on effectively managing the relationship between the two.

- The written paper that you have is some kind of edit of an article that you anticipate seeing in print at some point.
- The presentation is a 'reduction to the essentials of the content of the paper', conveying as much of the 'issues' in the paper as time allows.

Even at the most generous conference with the shortest papers, it is unlikely that you will be able to read out more than 50% of what you have written. This means that reading a paper is a bad strategy – there are some occasions when it works well, or you can use it as a standby if you are prone to 'blinking' in front of an audience. But generally, it is to be avoided at all costs, because there are more efficient ways of

telling the story of the issues in your paper than simply reading out a selection from your proto-article.

One key element of this is having a simple message in the presentation, and getting it over to the audience. The second slide (the introduction-outline) slide is important in this regard, in giving you the chance to set out immediately what you plan to do. The final slide is also important in giving you the chance to reiterate what the point, the problem solved or argument made within the paper was. This point needs not to be trite or simplistic, nor too complex to remember for an audience. A good rule is that three bullet points is usually effective for conveying the message.

Figure 2 You can never emphasise your main points enough in a presentation



It is good to have a structure for your presentation which gives the sense that the audience have gone through a funnel, from a very broad field in which the question lies, through empirical data and analysis, to a set of conclusions. The precise structure needs to reflect what you are hoping to achieve with the paper – a more theoretical paper may entirely be based around literature review, problem and methodology, or dwell on analysis and conclusions. But generally speaking, a good structure for a presentation is:

- Introduction (2 slides)
- Literature review (4 slides)
- Research Problem (1 slide)
- Methodology (2 slides)
- Results and empirical data (4 slides)
- Conclusions (2 slides)

A presentation is not the finished article; it does not have to be fully polished. Although a good presentation will be plausible it does not have to be entirely convincing, and there is no expectation that it is watertight. A good presentation will construct an argument as to why what is proposed fits with the problem initially raised, but will not necessarily pass judgement that this is the only way to solve the problem.

TIP 4: SIMPLE TRICKS MAKE EFFECTIVE PRESENTATIONS

There is no way to avoid the fact that public speaking can be extremely difficult, particularly if you suffer from nerves, as well as if English is not your first language. The unavoidable truth is that it is only with practice that you improve, and even a nervous presenter can become an accomplished public speaker with enough practice and mentoring. However, the downside of experience is that nerves at least encourage preparation, and a fault found with some more experienced speakers is that they come insufficiently prepared to speak, and this leads to disaster.

It is important to establish a rapport with the audience, and this can be helped by establishing eye contact with audience members, using the full range of voice pitches, emphasis and emotions, and giving audio and visual cues which parallel the development of the argument within the presentation. Some people are good at telling jokes and if you are not, then they are best avoided. Even if you are a natural comedian, jokes are very risky and have to be well planned, because humour is very culturally nuanced and these is a very fine line between funny and offensive.

Presentations these days are a high technology affair, with beamers, laptops, remote slide changes, and microphones standard in many conference venues. This technology has great advantages in allowing the skilled presented to enrich their material and entertain their audience. But technology will fail on you at some point, and a skilled presenter always has contingency plans in place for what to do in these circumstances. Going to the room ten minutes before the session to load presentations, check lighting and direct sunlight, and acoustics can leave time to find a technician if necessary.

Figure 3 Speaking off-the-cuff is refreshing in a session of overhead presentations



Another downside of technology is that it encourages people to do things which seem like a good idea at the time but which detract from distilling the focus of the presentation. You can fit 200 word quotations on a slide in 12 point Times New Roman. No one will be able to read them. You can use clip art for the obligatory 'thank you' slide at the end. No one will applaud. Well chosen images from your research can greatly add value to the presentation, but equally overdoing it and overloading the audience can turn them off to your messages. It goes without saying that ill-chosen or offensive images can have negative repercussions that may follow you outside the venue for a very long time!

Finally, DON'T OVERRUN. It's that simple. It's your presentation that is standing between the audience and their coffee break, and if you get in the way, you'll be resented.

TIP 5: GETTING THE BEST FEEDBACK IS IMPORTANT

One of the main reasons to go to a conference is to get some feedback on what you are doing, and to do better in the future, whether in terms of the content or direction of the research or presenting that research to an audience. Everyone has an opinion, and what is important to you at the conference is getting the opinions which matter to you at the point you are at in your proceeding.

Don't be afraid to ask the opinions of others throughout the conference. If there is a discussant and you are keen for feedback, then you can approach him/she before the conference and ask him/she to read the paper and give comments – more often than you might expect, people are willing to do this. If someone gives a good comment during a session, then it can be useful to approach him/she after the session and discuss it further. If someone is willing to voice an opinion, then they may also be willing to read your paper and send you some comments after the conference. Also, be clear about your limitations in giving the presentation – if there are areas that are uncertain to you, or you are still wrestling with, then don't be afraid to highlight this and to say that you would welcome comments to help solve the problem.

It is completely acceptable to ask someone you know to come and watch your presentation and give you feedback. This might be your supervisor or one of your fellow students. Although supervisors can be good at commenting on the detail of your theoretical argument and evidence base, most people can helpfully point out what you do well, and areas where you can improve. Another role for an appointed observer can be to write down the feedback that you are getting, particularly if you are someone who says 'Thank you, any questions?'

Your opinions matters too. As a young academic in a big conference, it can be quite overawing to see the grandees of your field at the height of their game presenting their material. What you think matters, although it probably matters more to yourself than it will to them. When watching plenary and keynote sessions, watch how these people give presentations, and ask yourself

- 'What are they doing well?'
- 'What am I finding interesting?'
- 'How could I use this reflection to improve my own skills?'

Because everyone tends to see these flagship presentations, you can also discuss your perceptions with other people, and come to a view on what makes a good – or in some cases, a terrible – presentation. Then learn these lessons!

Finally, don't forget to say 'thank you!' to people who do help, and for those that really put time into helping you develop your ideas, you might want to formally acknowledge them when the idea comes into print.

TIP 6: THE CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE IS A WAY TO SITUATE YOURSELF

Conferences are one of the pillars of academic life, alongside publication, studying/researching and educating the next generation. For much of the time, academics can be isolated from the international knowledge communities, but their membership of these communities allows them to carry out the other key tasks. Attending conferences is a means to join this wider knowledge community, and to situate yourself within a discipline. This gives you the confidence that when you return home to your parent institution, that the work that you are doing fits with academic norms and is of a high quality.

Conferences are very social occasions, and like markets in Marrakech, the social side provides the lubricant which is necessary for the business activities to be satisfactorily concluded. This means that it is very important to be happy whilst attending a conference, so that you can 'present your best face' to the outside world. This can be difficult if you are not a particularly social person, but conferences are for better or for worse a largely unavoidable element of academic life. That means not being upset by irrelevant things, such as the quality of breakfast or the shortness of breaks. But equally, it is fair enough to do things that you know will make you happy – a good tip is if there is one speaker that you know really excites or interests you, go and see that paper, because it will give you a 'lift' that will propel you through the conference.

Figure 4 Make sure you sit at a 'friendly table' at conference dinners



Doing your best at a conference means that you need to feel comfortable in your surroundings. For some people, this can mean feeling like they fit in well. This can be that you fit intellectually with the conference, which is a matter of choosing conferences and tracks carefully. As one of the speakers at the event pointed out, what you wear can make a difference in this regard – Umberto Eco famously spoke through his clothes, and it is true that what economists wear to go to conferences is very different from what planners tend to wear.

The face to face experience of a contact allows you the opportunity to build your networks and interact with people. This is one of the reasons why the social elements of a conference is important, because if you want to develop a relationship with someone to help with your research – such as a field visit – the conference allows you the time to see if you do get along with them, and indicates whether you are the kinds of personalities which can fruitfully co-operate. You can also ask people all kinds of leading questions – with journals sponsoring many conferences, there is the opportunity to speak to editors in identifying potential publishing outlets.

TIP 7: TO FAIL TO PREPARE IS TO PREPARE TO FAIL

We have saved the most important point to the last, and it is that it is critical to prepare properly for a conference on every level. You need to be properly equipped to go to a city in a foreign town for a very short time, and be certain that you will dazzle people with your intellect, charm potential new contacts, attract potential employers and research collaborators, and enjoy yourself at the same time. For most people, this means that you have to be fairly systematic in your preparations to make sure that the event is successful.

The old adage is that 'you have to be in it to win it': if your paper is not accepted and you don't register in time, then you are going to miss out on the fun. It is sensible to write all the deadlines in your diary so that you have plenty of time to write the most eye-catching abstract, the most representative paper, the most entertaining presentation, and to get the conference fee paid on time. Some conferences offer prizes and bursaries for people who submit on time or who meet eligibility criteria. These can make attending conferences much easier and bring fringe benefits, so work out what applies to you, and write deadlines into your diary.

Some conferences offer choices of sessions and tracks and there are a few simple guidelines for getting the most out of your attendance at a conference. The first is that the one session you can't really walk out of is the one you give in, so choose a track that means you will be interested in what your co-presenters have to say. Secondly, there are limited returns to following a single track, and it can be good to visit different tracks to get a sense of the breadth of the discipline. Thirdly, it is vital that you are entertained, challenged and interested, so pick papers that you know you will want to hear. Finally, it is extremely rare for everyone to attend all sessions, so if you want to take an hour to see the city or just chill out, identify the sessions that interest you least where these opportunities can be taken.

Finally, conferences are all about the networking, and as much as the paper and the tracks, identifying which people you want to meet benefits from prior thought and preparation. For more senior people you want to meet, it is reasonable to email them beforehand to explain why you want to meet up with them. Some people will be operating on a drop-in basis, or expecting approaches during the conference, particularly editors of journals and book series. Some people will be unobtainable during the conference, and it is important not to be disappointed if you cannot meet all the people you had hoped. Finally, serendipity works, and going to social events is a good way of coming across people with similar interests to your own but of whom you were unaware.