

Believe Me, Conferences Are Worth the Effort!

Beverly Tetterton

"... another conference. Why are they always at the busiest time of the year?" As the time draws near, any hopes of clearing my desk are diminished. "I will never get this schedule straight ... I hope they got my late registration." It's 5:00 a.m., and my colleagues are parked in front of the house waiting ... "Oh no, I forgot to call ... who's going to cover? ... this is ridiculous ... why do I bother to go ... hassle, hassle, hassle. I really should stay home and take care of things."

If these thoughts sound familiar, you are a conference burnout. Sure it is a hassle, but whose fault is that? The conference is not to blame. Maybe it is not the conference that really bothers you, but the prospect of bringing home more work as a result of the conference. Just think of all the paperwork it may generate. Maybe it is not that you have more important things to do, but you fear the creation of more work for yourself. After all, you may actually get excited about a new idea and want to follow through with it. Yes, the work will pile up at home, but is it worth passing up the chance to learn something new and enjoy yourself? If so, then you are burned out whether you go to the conference or not. Will remaining on duty in order to "take care of a few things" really change your outlook? A few days at a conference might actually be good for you. Stop taking yourself and the hassle so seriously. Look for the obvious rewards. Could it be that conferences really do have something to offer?

If you read it in the literature, does it mean that you do not need to hear it? True, the sessions often cover the same old topics, but occasionally there is a new twist that lights a spark and gives a new perspective. If you can bring back one new idea or pick up one gem of information, the trip is worth it. Why not treat yourself to a little stimulation?

The gems are often found in the most unexpected places. The out-of-the mainstream lec-

tures and workshops which do not directly relate to your job can nevertheless provide you with just the right incentive to move forward. Try a few sessions out of your milieu. An inspirational speaker (Dorothy Spruill Redford at the 1989 NCLA Conference comes to mind) from a totally different discipline can be uplifting. There are also the special interest lectures and workshops. Several years ago I attended a session on claymation and walked away with ideas for two successful library programs.

One of the best ways to learn is good old-fashioned observation. You cannot beat it for stirring up interest and maybe a little fun. Admittedly, travel can be a hassle. You have to wade through the expense forms, registration paperwork, find adequate transportation, and whether you live down east or out west you will be up before the crack of dawn if you want to make it to the first session. On the other hand, travel can be relaxing and enjoyable. Plan to stop at a few libraries on the way to your destination and visit the local libraries in the city of the conference. You do not even have to be in a library to pick up good ideas. Museums and other cultural institutions are great places to add to your itinerary. Sightseeing might be the most productive part of your trip. Even if you do not pick up any earth-shaking ideas, you may return home feeling better about your own library and the job you are doing there.

Next there is always the "show within the show"—otherwise known as people watching. Go to a session early and mingle with your colleagues. Librarians are generally a warm and friendly group of people always willing to talk shop. A conference is the best time to find out what others are doing. Local restaurants, receptions, and the hotel lobby and bar are breeding grounds for good ideas.

The exhibit hall is worth the trip. There is nothing like fooling around with the latest tech-

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COUNTERPOINT

Be Serious, They're Such a Hassle!

Michael Cotter

Don't get me wrong; I like to go to conferences. You get to see old friends, make new ones, hear papers that you might not otherwise take the time to read, and rejuvenate yourself. It's just that, for one thing, getting there and back is more than half the battle. You have to get the time off, find someone to work your night, arrange for transportation, and, if you're a state employee, fill out a "Petition to Travel"—an omen of things to come. The petition has you fill in the method of transportation (including state or private car. If it's a private car, you have to justify the reason, such as "no state cars available," or "not convenient to take a state car," although I haven't tried that one yet. I know someone who was in a state car that broke down en route to a conference in Chapel Hill fifteen years ago, and hasn't taken a state car since!). It also asks that you estimate costs, including air fare if applicable, and attach a copy of the conference announcement or registration. In some departments, you need to make travel plans at least three weeks in advance just to clear it through channels; in others, you shouldn't reserve a state car until you get permission to travel, by which time the state cars are gone. (So, you tentatively reserve a state car and hope that your petition is approved.) Oh, yes, remember when no more than five people from the same department could attend the same conference? That goes back to the time when several state employees went to a conference in Hawaii and the media heard about it and spread the news.

Well, what's next? If you live anywhere east of I95 or west of Winston-Salem, you might as well plan on leaving the night before if the conference is in the Triangle-Triad area since a good part of the day will be spent on the road. If the best meetings begin any time before 10 a.m. and the conference is in Winston, you have to figure on leaving Greenville at 5 a.m. (Now you know why the people from the east are always late.) And then you find out that your traveling companion does not

care to get there for the keynote address—or wants to leave before the closing session. And let's hope that this same traveling companion does not include anyone who takes Business 264 and just has to stop at this place in Sims that has good coffee!

When you get to the conference, you have to check in at the hotel, go through registration, and make sure that the meetings you plan to attend aren't all at the same time. A tip on checking in: it's a good idea to hold your room for late arrival; in this computer age, hotels will automatically cancel your reservation if you don't arrive by 6 p.m. (That happened to someone standing in the line next to me at the Chicago Marriott this summer; she had been held up by traffic from O'Hare and was about ten minutes late.)

In general, most conferences do a good job of not scheduling overlapping sessions of interest to people with similar interests, but when you talk about conferences the size of ALA, there's certain to be some overlap. Maybe it's a matter of degree of overlap. You hope, of course, that your favorite meeting won't be scheduled as the last session on the last day, such as the NCASL meeting at this year's NCLA conference. Otherwise, the place is deserted when you leave, and your flight may not be for two or three hours, or you have to drive for six hours in the dark. (I realize that someone has to be scheduled last—maybe the public library directors, or LS/2000 User's Group.)

I've seldom been hungry at conferences. Begin with free Danish and coffee from 8:30 'til 10:00, then a lunch, afternoon refreshments, heavy hors d'oeuvres, and an evening reception. It's all I can do to get back to my room without having to let my belt out a notch. At a really good conference you get started on some heavy discussion about end-user searching or smart versus dumb bar-coding, carry the session into the late hours in the bar or someone's room, and get up the next morning and navigate by force of habit. Eventually, you just skip a meal, or you head for the salad and fruit bar (hold the dressing, please).

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nology or learning about the hot new deal to save your library some much needed cash. There is also the feeling of power while talking to the vendors. No matter what your position of authority, a salesperson will make you feel important. They are interesting people with a different perspective and are fun to get to know. They want to serve you, so why not let them?

Last, but certainly not least, a conference is one of the few places on earth where colleagues can build camaraderie. News, gossip and "horror stories" are exchanged in a relaxed atmosphere. The trip to and from the conference as well as sharing a hotel room are opportunities to confirm or alter your opinion of fellow staff members. Librarian-bonding gives you the strength to go home and face that pile of work with a grin on your face. The smile may be returned by your new-found comrade.

The reasons for going to conferences have probably not changed since the birth of ALA. This does not necessarily make them good or bad. The important thing is that everyone has the opportunity to benefit in some way when they attend a conference. Leave your job worries at home and attend the usual (and some unrelated) sessions with the hope of picking up at least one gem of an idea. Enjoy the busman's holiday while you observe new places and meet new colleagues. Learn about new technology while the vendors treat you like the important person you are. Have a laugh with your co-workers while you share a few experiences. Most important of all, if you don't take yourself or the conference too seriously, you might just learn something!

Counterpoint (continued)

Those wonderful folks at Congressional Information Service know how to entertain. All the documents librarians (and maybe their directors, too) are invited to a breakfast at ALA each year, at which you hear a legislator or other figure involved in government information policy (or, as it seems to be now, non-policy). Not only does CIS mail invitations to you, they also run an ad in *Documents to the People* in case you didn't receive an invitation. Thanks, Mr. Adler.

Speaking of CIS, I enjoy the exhibits. You hear the latest news from salesmen: the new products, a forthcoming discount on the latest reference work, and (the important stuff) who's changing jobs and why. Of course, you pick up fliers for books that you can't possibly order with the little budget that's remaining this year; posters that you eventually can't find a place for; and shopping bags that you add to the stack behind your desk

for that rainy day when you need a bag to take work home in. In the end, I just pick up a few pens for the people in the office.

But after all that food and drink and fellowship, it's good to hit the road, get back home—and back to that mountain of mail that came in while you were gone. You spend all day just opening mail and returning calls. As a professional, of course, you take some of it home, but there are some things that you can't do there, so you lug it back the next morning. (Plus, you have five days of laundry and dozens of things to tell your family and vice versa, so you don't get much done there, either.) Finally, you try to figure out how to fill in your reimbursement form, the state's answer to Form 1040. Well, if your library is like mine, there's a super office assistant who will take your botched-up form, set it right, and get you reimbursed for more than you thought you could justify. Thanks, Lou.

Library Research (continued)

Department, Davis Library), examined the relationship of subject searches in the online catalog to circulation patterns and profiles of the collection. Their study is not yet complete, but the authors do plan to publish the results.

Finally, in 1988/89 North Carolina State University's Janet Edgerton (Monographic Cataloging, NCSU Libraries) and Raymond Taylor (Educational Leadership and Development) received a grant to study the editing efficiency of an online bibliographic information system, based on an examination of a large file of edit commands. This investigation is still ongoing, but the authors expect to attain publishable results, which will likely be used to improve technical editing operations at the NCSU Libraries.

An informal survey of the grant recipients confirms that the researchers think their collaborative approach was a useful one. The librarians were able to offer teaching faculty a laboratory for research, familiarity with the area under study, and knowledge of the best sources of information within the library organization. They also enjoyed the opportunity to think in broader theoretical terms about their work. Faculty members brought technical expertise (e.g., in statistical methods) and a wider research perspective. In NCSU's case, the fact that the faculty member is a department head in another discipline further enhanced communication on library matters across campus. Although the maximum size of a grant is relatively small (\$3,000), application to this program is an excellent way to fund a focused project. In the words of Eric Palo, "I would urge others to consider applying ... and if they don't get it, to try again!"