Communicating at international scientific conferences? The key to being selected, understood, and published

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Abstract

The chapter "*How to communicate at international conferences?*" proposes to split the overarching question into several parts: first, how to be qualified by the scientific committee of an international conference; second, how to make key elements of a conference presentation understandable to a heterogeneous audience; third, how to deal competently with questions; fourth, how to enjoy an unforgettable moment of discovery and encounters; and finally, how to have your paper published in conference proceedings and/or ideally in a qualifying review.

Keywords: self evaluation, relevance, network, publishing

1   Introduction

The content of this chapter results directly from a series of training modules designed for PhD students since 2006 at the University of Grenoble Alpes, which have been extensively exported abroad to partner universities. This chapter has been taken directly from the lecture: *How to communicate at an international conference?*

The objectives of the training module *How to communicate at international conferences?* could be summarized as follows:

> To succeed in being selected by the scientific committee of an international conference for which the student has submitted a part of his PhD-thesis in response to a call for papers; to succeed in making key elements of a presentation understandable to a heterogeneous a priori interested audience; to deal competently with questions, whatever their nature and/or critical dimension; to enjoy an unforgettable moment of discovery and encounters ; and to succeed in being published in the conference proceedings and/or ideally in a qualifying review.

2   How to reply to a call for papers? Why, when, where?

Some advice to start with: First, do not wait until you have completed your PhD-thesis before replying to an international call. There are several reasons why a student should not shy away from that. Second, participating at an international conference is an excellent opportunity to test your work and seek the opinion of others apart from your supervisor. Moreover, successful participation could constitute an evaluation criterion, and eventually boost one's career chances: search committees take into account not only your thesis but also your publications. Third, this could be a benefit for the research unit which is hosting you to prepare your PhD-thesis. But to succeed, requires proper self-evaluation and the right moment to respond to a call: neither too early nor too late, depending on the answers to two sets of questions:

1. From the actual state of my PhD-work in progress, what could be my contribution? - a theoretical one, a methodological one or a conceptual one? Am I really making the right choice in applying to a call? Is the call concerned with my own scientific discipline? Will the proposals be reviewed by a scientific committee? Remember: *"Don't waste your ammunition"*, because when a paper has been published, it cannot appear elsewhere in another scientific review or book. So, I must at least be sure that a scientific committee exists. If not, I do not apply!

2. A second useful question is: Do you really have something to communicate? Once more, you must define your own contribution to your scientific discipline, preferably with the support of your supervisor: Could it be a methodological, a conceptual or a theoretical contribution? Then, writing

the abstract for your application calls for careful consideration of the expectations set out in the call for papers: always observe the details of the call; always respect the formal rules when writing your abstract; always consider the deadline for submitting your proposal.

Identify a possible and necessary convergence between the PhD-thesis and the general topic of the international conference. Then, familiarize yourself with the organisers' expectations and try to identify the possible convergence between the part of the PhD-thesis you are considering as a possible contribution and the axes of the colloquium (expected orientations) to facilitate the integration of your presentation (if accepted). Thereafter, pay close attention to the application procedure in terms of the formal textual requirements,

To conclude this first part, *"How to reply to a call"*, remember that a scientific committee tries to understand the same elements as a jury during a PhD-thesis defence:

• Is there a problematic, i.e. indications of an epistemological heritage, that makes sense of my questions for the discipline, and specifies my theoretical embedment and major concepts?
• What are my hypotheses, and must any of them be justified according to the issues raised by the conference?
• Is the case study perfectly identified, as a construct, depending on previously selected problematic and hypotheses?
• Are the methodologies consistent regarding the theoretical embedment?
• Do we see a formal structure, i.e. bibliographic indications or keywords at the end of the summary, constituting my reply to the call?

From that, as a minimum, the scientific committee will proceed to evaluate and select proposals based on the usual criteria. The general principle is a double-blind evaluation, according to previously defined and set out criteria. The selection process involves criteria such as the originality of the proposal, the extent to which the proposal matches the axes of the conference, the extent to which the approach can be considered as innovative as well as the proposal's theoretical and empirical quality.

Once your abstract has been selected, you now have to write the text for your oral presentation as if it were a final paper to be integrated in the proceedings. Following the oral presentation, a second assessment by a new scientific committee is usually necessary for the written conference paper. When writing up the conference paper one has to follow the conference's style guide in order to be considered for publication.

3 How to prepare a successful oral presentation (communicating and being understood)?

The following proposals must be considered solely as recommendations. Do not forget that formal aspects of your presentation are not enough, if the fundamental aspects have been neglected. Formal attention merely constitutes a help.

So, from my previous experience (as a leader of workshops, lecturer, or simply as a participant), I would propose seven precautions to facilitate appropriation on the part of your audience.

1. Communication will be facilitated if you, as a speaker, consider that nothing is obvious
    • I prepare and display my key message, i.e. my approach and contribution to advancing the state of the art;
    • I clarify terminologies and the nature of used terms, i.e. are they pre-notional, concepts, categories or paradigms?
    • I clarify the status of my affirmations, i.e. are they quotations, a belief, a doxa, hypotheses or demonstrated results?
    • I refer, i.e. I prioritize my sources; I clarify the status of my references (is the structure based on a book or a paper, a theory, an official report, or a testimony?);
    • I translate, i.e. I explain, particularly when using abbreviations, foreign terms, technical jargon, topography, or local context.

2. Communication will be facilitated… if you, as a speaker, enlarge your talk beyond its textual dimension
    • I provide visuals, i.e. prepare a balanced image/text on my Power-Point screen, especially regarding the key message; just write one idea per slide; write key words, major authors as reference (see more, Heinderyckx, 2015);
    • I use the power of pauses, i.e. I frame the key message between silences;
    • I pay attention to my own gestures, i.e. I train myself to open postures; I move; I concentrate on the congruence of gesture and speech;
    • I use my voice to maximum effect, i.e. I train and modulate tone, pace, power and speed of my diction;
    • I engage the attention of my audience, i.e. I display my plan, visual scanning.

3. Communication will be facilitated… if you, as a speaker, know that your audience needs prior information
    • Some people need to immediately know contextual and concrete elements including the case study. So, I expose these asap;
    • I explain the structure of my presentation and construct bridges between the different sections;
    • People need to know the theoretical embedment of my communication. So, I expose it too asap: I must remember that my approach should be connected to the general theme of the international conference;
    • I clarify the specific protocol of my case study;
    • I provide indications and reasons for delimitations; specify methodologies.

4. Communication will be facilitated… if you, as a speaker, know how to quickly provoke a feedback
    • I punctuate my oral communication, i.e. I include pauses to create rhythm and facilitate appropriation;
    • I carefully observe the reactions of my audience;
    • I provoke feedback before my conclusion, questioning the public without necessarily waiting for the planned period of debate following my oral presentation.

5. Communication will be facilitated… if you, as a speaker, consider every question as relevant
    • I suppress my polemical reflexes, *i.e.* I refrain from verbal assault and avoid replying: 'yes, but…';
    • I wait for the end of the question before replying, *i.e.* I abstain from interrupting, and reply only when I have understood what the question implies;
    • I consider the expectations behind the question and re-solicit, particularly when I am faced with a generic, ideological, aggressive or blurry question;
    • I try to get more details from the person putting the question by means of echoing the question, remaining silent for a while, raising a hypothesis or another question;
    • I solicit validation of my understanding of the question, and then I go on to solicit validation of the quality of my reply.

6. Communication will be facilitated… if you, as a speaker, know how to adapt yourself to the modes of communication of others
    *   I prepare two sets of exhibition materials in case there is a non-planned event, *i.e.* I prepare options: one detailed PowerPoint and another more general PowerPoint;
    *   I do not repeat but rephrase, i.e. I vary the registers: declarative register / participative register / representative register; adapt to my audience's mood;
    *   I anticipate hazards and always have a backup plan, i.e., in case of a technical failure, shortened deadlines, late participants, forgotten document, etc.;
    *   I do not try to cover everything in my presentation, so I refocus on my key message, rather than try to cover everything in a hurry;
    *   My conclusion is always an opening one and not a closing conclusion, i.e. I pick up on raised questions, suggest hypotheses for possible future research work.

7. Communication will be facilitated… if you, as a speaker, question your own performance after you have finished it: *the meaning of your message is also part of the feedback you provoke*
    *   My audience looks stressed: maybe that means that I appeared stressed when I began speaking. So, to anticipate my next presentation and try to reduce my own stress, I'll test the exhibition material (micro, auditorium chair, translation, video-projector);
    *   My audience crushed me with their superiority; maybe that means that I did the same, unconsciously. So, to improve my future performance, I'll prepare a humble introduction, I speak as soon as possible about my limitations, difficulties, without under-valuating my competencies;
    *   My audience wrongly accuses me; maybe that means that I was imprecise in my formulation. So, to improve my future performance, I'll accept that what I said is perhaps not what I meant, or what I have effectively said. Recognition of a slip of tongue avoids sterile disputes;
    *   My audience criticizes me; maybe that means that I was wrong. So, to improve my future performance, I'll consider the criticism as an opportunity. I'll focus on the content of the criticism and not on considering the question as a personal attack;
    *   My audience says they have not understood; maybe that means that it was not possible to understand because my way of speaking. So, to improve my future performance, I'll articulate more clearly and speak louder, particularly when stating the key message;

- My audience praised my presentation or they stigmatized me; focusing on that would mean preparing my next failure, thinking that I am a genius or a bad pupil. So, to improve my future performance, I self-debrief, i.e. without any concession or misplaced pride, after my oral presentation I try to identify my strengths as my axis of progress, in fundamental and in formal terms. 'If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two impostors just the same, Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it, And —which is more —you'll be a Man, my son' (If, by Rudyard Kipling).

4   Post presentation (enlarge your networks and be published)

Now it is time to think: How could you intensify your own networks and promote your paper's content? To succeed and develop the benefits past your own oral communication calls for two basic actions: first, you must expand your participation during the whole conference, and secondly, you must carefully respect the publisher's style sheet to be edited.

The first basic step is to integrate the whole environment of the international conference:

- I reject personal academic tourism, i.e. I must avoid leaving the conference immediately at the end of my oral communication. I stay and listen to other oral presentations and enlarge my circle of contacts.
- I participate in other presentations, i.e. I take notes, I question, and I prepare summaries of presentations, especially the opening conference (often a state of the art)
- I participate in extra conference activities, i.e. I honour our host, take lunch at the conference venue; I uncompromisingly attend official functions; participate in planned excursions; respect local customs, being careful about taking personal initiatives to visit; distribute calling cards and maintain contact asap after the conference ends

After the conference, once you are back in your country and preparing your final paper, if requested, for a scientific publication (proceedings, review or book), you must respect the editing guidelines:

- I oberve guidelines, i.e. I pay attention to the style sheet and deadlines;
- I evaluate the type of proposed publication, i.e. I prioritize the publication in peer reviewed journals or edited volumes, rather than conference proceedings; *i.e.* I try to give priority to a linguistic diversity of publications, paying attention to the qualifying nature of the review;

- I mention my own lab, my university and its partners, because the benefit must also be a collective one, i.e. I provide information about the publication to my PhD-thesis supervisor (who is interested) and sort publications according to their nature in order to prepare reports (individual assessment and evaluation of my laboratory).

4   As a conclusion

Now, everything is perfect. Your paper has been edited. But don't think your work is finished. While you are preparing how to disseminate your work, it could be relevant to think about its valorization via scientific communities:

- I disseminate information via the university's communication service, i.e. I inform other scientific units and assist the international relations department in structuring offers;
- I inform partners, because individual success is in their interest, too;
- I prepare media coverage, if relevant, i.e. I am available for interviews, round tables, which is one way to honour the organisers and my own laboratory, too.

In the longer term, you can think about the set terms of communication in a curriculum vitæ, and your lab's four or five-year report. So, you should classify asap your own contribution in terms of influence and academic attractiveness:

- Participation in national and international collaborative research projects: (write time-period and the name of the relevant research units). This concerns e.g. third-party funded research…
- Participation in regional research projects (write date and level of commitment: participation, accountability ...)
- Regular collaborations with other laboratories (engagement with other research laboratories)
- Participation in national and international networks, and in EU cooperation projects (JPI Joint Programming Initiative-COST-European Cooperation in Science and Technology, etc…),
- Participation in federative structures or FRS (federative research structures)
- Participation in national scientific societies (e.g. Société Française des Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication): responsibilities (level of participation, reality of commitments and achievements)
- Participation in programmed scientific projects (preparation of proposals, infrastructure, installation, etc.)

- Organisation of national and international conferences; organisation of international study day, organisation of scientific events... (organisation = member of the organising committee or responsible scientific committee)
- Awards and distinctions: exact description of the awards with date of production; distinctions: (appointment, election to an agency with mention of date...)
- Invitations to scientific events (opening or closing conference); guest keynote speaker
- Collections editor for scientific publishers
- Participation on editorial boards
- Participation in scientific committees of symposiums or conferences, (give exact title and date of the conference), and the exact role (evaluation of articles? Committee chairperson? ...)
- Participation in proceedings of scientific expertise
- Awarded scholarships and financial grants (period duration): research time credits; delegation; research bonus
- Contracts: prizes for research, lecturing, registered trade marks ...

Even later on, what could be important to valorize are the interactions with social, economic and cultural environment, *i.e.*

- Products for various non-academic stakeholders, related to research work (list references):
- Participation in national and international collaborative research projects: (give time-period and name of the research units concerned). This concerns e.g. third-party funded research…
- Papers edited in professional or technical journals, synthetic works for experts;
- Studies and expert reports for public and private decision-makers; contribution to establishing standards;
- Details of support activities and events (science festivals, for example) contributing to the dissemination of scientific culture, to continuous training and public debate.
- Valorization methods (dissemination among academic and non-academic communities)

Commitment to partnership relations and any element demonstrating the interest and commitment of non-academic partners, visibility of the research entity in the socio-economic or cultural field, such as:

- Installation of support structures for technology transfer; involvement in interface structures (clusters, mixed units and network technology clusters, associations of citizens, etc.);
- Collaboration with cultural institutions (museums, libraries, conservatories, theatres and operas, etc.); scientific activities with large libraries, museums, cultural centres, cinemas (conferences, lecture series) theater ... (indicate the exact type of collaboration)
- Participation in cultural events, heritage programmes, debates; e.g. member of scientific councils of economic and cultural institutions
- Administration and provision of documents (specialized libraries, archives, digital resources);
- Contracts with non-academic partners (publishing contracts, supply of expertise or resources, etc.);
- Participation in partnerships (scientific committee, policy committee…);
- Organisation of conferences, debates, exhibitions, seminars and training courses for professionals or for social groups (associations of patients, consumers, environmental protection, etc.)…;
- Appointments to national or international panels of experts (health agencies, international organisations, etc.).

Results of research collaborations and partnerships, such as:

- Business start-ups, contribution to the creation, maintenance or development of employment in an economic sector;
- Effects on public health, on the environment, on land, on legislation, on the public debate, etc.;
- Creation of new structures or professional organisations;
- National, European or international regulations backed by results or contributions of the research unit; expert opinions to assess the potential impacts of technological innovations.

You must also consider your pedagogical and administrative responsibilities to be important (regularly, you have to update a list of your responsibilities during your contract : period, sector, description of position held). And finally, you have to classify your publication during the reporting period, in accordance with the categories that international assessment agencies use to define.

To summarize, remember that participating in an international scientific conference is a commitment that will profit the organising institution and its partners, your own scientific laboratory and the university that hosts it, the science discipline to which you belong, finally you and your career. Or not!

5 References

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Useful Sources

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University of Wisconsin-Madison's APA Pages: http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocAPA.html.
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Biography

Bertrand Cabedoche is Professor of information and communication sciences, UNESCO chairholder on *International Communication* at the University of Grenoble Alpe (UGA), member of the executive board of ORBICOM (Montréal). Docteur d'état in political sciences (1987), graduate of the Higher School of Journalism of Lille (1978), Bertrand Cabedoche is now in charge of the international development of GRESEC, a well-known French academic research team in the field of information and communication, and responsible for the International development of the Doctoral School of UGA. He is member too of the board of advisors of the *European Communication Research and Education Association* (ECREA). In December 2012, proposed by Mrs Irina Bokova, General Director of Unesco, he was nominated as the president of the global network Orbicom (Unesco chairs in Communication). Bertrand Cabedoche has been invited to organise seminars or give lectures in 50 universities, all over the world. He regularly works as an expert for Unesco and Unicef.

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