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Organization of conferences and science events

Introduction

One of the activities aiming to promulgate science are conferences. Usually, they are meetings of groups of people working on science, theoreticians, practitioners, as well as hobbyists for whom the subject is not a matter of professional interests. Such meetings are supposed to enable presentation and discussion about the results of scientific research. The participants can revise their knowledge, learn about new issues or seek inspiration to conduct their own research. During the lecture sessions, the lecturers can present their papers, which are often published in the form of post-conference articles or monographs. Presenting the research in the form of poster sessions is another way of participation, during which questions may be directed at the authors. The discussions allow for the exchange of opinions and establishing new science contacts. There is also a chance to define the issues relating to the posters whose authors are specialists in the subject matter. Often the sessions can be structured around one specific key issue. Lecture sessions may dedicate part of the session to discussion panels, during which the audience can ask the lecturers questions. During the event, the so-called „coffee breaks” are also planned. In the modern society, where science culture is developed not just inside lecture halls, but in much less formal places as well, “coffee breaks” seem to be a necessary element allowing for back room conversation. This enables the participants to more directly confer with each other, without the barriers created by the podium or the auditory hall.

Thanks to the analysis of the course of various science conferences, a conclusion can be drawn that it is possible to pinpoint the elements which the organizers deem to be absolutely necessary. Such elements can be found in almost every conference schedule. This fact enables us to create a general outline of a science conference, which we can define as a model. Being aware of the principles of organizing the event can prove to be extremely useful. It enables efficient coordination, minimizing the threat of errors and let us easily introduce improvements which can enrich the

event. In recent years, the market of educational services has experienced great growth. Similarly, science conferences and educational events are no longer a niche occupied by just universities. More and more cultural institutions, associations and even private companies introduce conferences as a permanent element of their operations. The animation of natural history is a field which can benefit greatly from said forms promoting knowledge and science culture. Noticing the huge potential found in natural history, as well as the broad spectrum of forms it can take, the necessity to develop new competences in employees whose responsibility is the animation and mediation of knowledge becomes obvious.

Results

“Organization of conference and science events” classes were one of the elements of the course on Animation of Natural Culture specialization. The classes were taken by two groups: students of biology and students of environmental protection and they took the form of labs. Active participation enabled the students to learn about the concept not just in theory, but also through workshops allowing for putting the gained knowledge into test. The introductory phase of the labs made it possible to verify the initial level of knowledge of students about science conferences, various educational events, as well as their forms and course. The sources of knowledge about conferences and events were also a point of interest. According to the students, the Internet – social networking websites created by universities and similar organizations – was the most common source of information about events and conferences. This fact was enough to draw the conclusion that the students’ knowledge about the subject matter needs to be expanded upon and systematized. During the classes the students were asked to give their opinions about conferences and educational events, in which they had a chance to participate in the past. They did not have any significant experience in such events, and none of the students took active part in any conference, either as a lecturer or by presenting a poster. However, the students participated in internships organized in cooperating institutions within the project of Animation of Natural Culture. Sparking the discussion allowed for the exchange of opinions, determination of the most important elements which make conferences attractive for participants, as well as the elements which should be avoided. The classes used active methods of work. Thanks to the met plan method, the students could arrange their knowledge and assumptions about conferences in three main groups: the aims, the advantages and the ballast (elements which can hinder the effective organization.) Thanks to this, the conclusion that events relating to animation of natural culture are a complex and multi-stage process. Various types and forms of conference and the possibilities of organizing educational events were discussed. A discourse about standard conferences (taking place at universities) and multimedia conferences (becoming more and more popular in the knowledge based society) also took place. According to Fisher “active participation with the use of interactive technologies can escalate the debate to levels which were unachievable

in small groups of people in the past.” One of the main targets of the workshops was the creation of a “Conference kit” understood as a set of key points, which the students deemed necessary in any science conference.

The students decided that the vital elements of science conferences are:

- greeting of participants,
- defining the order of lectures according to the subject,
- pointing out the importance of special guest and honouring them with specifically designated time for their speeches,
- coffee break – allowing for the exchange of opinions in the back room,
- organization of a co-event, which would enrich the programme and/or would allow the participants to relax and integrate,
- planning poster sessions,
- organization of discussion panels,
- allowing for extra time to summarize the conference,
- saying goodbye to the guests.

The students could confront the results of their work with real life examples of schedules and plans of various science conferences, which they were given as handouts. The examples came from both science conferences organized at different kinds of Polish universities, e.g. Pedagogical University of Cracow, as well as cultural institutions such as the National Museum in Kraków. In the handouts, the students could also find examples of schedules and invitations from conferences organized by private companies and publishers of educational materials. Despite not having the rank of a true science conference, said events did have the word “conference” in their names. Additionally, the students could familiarize themselves with examples of methods of planning science conferences. The wide image of the characteristic of logistical planning the event became the basis of the next exercise which the students completed. They were to create an outline of basic and necessary activities which had to be taken into account when planning a science conference. A discussion about the exercise allowed the students to draw conclusions.

The results of their debates are as follows:

I. The scope of basic activities during planning the organization of science conferences:

- choice of the main subject – a specific subject should be chosen and the aim of the conference should be clearly defined (these concepts determine the type of guests/participants of the conference, the choice of the venue, and the budget for the particular event.) One has to remember to choose the subject prior to the event in order to give enough time for hypothetical participants to prepare their speeches and posters. Paying attention to the calendar of current science events can prove very useful as well, in order not to overlap with a different conference of similar or higher significance,

- choice of target audience – are the invited guests active members of scientific domain, or private people, students or members of a particular profession, e.g. teachers,
- preparation of the list of participants – having such a list prior to the event is essential as it allows for cost-planning, renting an appropriately sized hall, organization of transport and accommodation,
- the venue in which the event takes place is of extreme importance, as it can have a non-trivial impact on its attractiveness. The choice of the venue can determine the attendance – it can either encourage to or deter people from participation (e.g. due to inconvenient access),
- organization of co-events – a dinner summarizing the event, a ball, a trip to an interesting place, or a performance e.g. a string quartet concert,
- the organizers are responsible for checking the equipment of lecture halls and making sure that the equipment works properly. It seems necessary to designate people responsible for the technical side of electronic equipment,
- the information about accommodation, such as pricing, should be included in the plan of the event. If there is no possibility to organize overnight stay, the guests should be informed, especially those coming from afar, that they may need to find their own accommodation,
- finances are of utmost importance. We have to ask whether the event will be co-financed by the university representing our event, or if we have any sponsors – if not, barter transactions may prove very useful. It should be determined whether the admission is charged, and if yes, what is covered by the charge (e.g. the costs of post-conference publications, accommodation, etc.) The costs of renting equipment or rooms should be taken into account as well if we cannot provide our own,
- event advertising – preparation and sending the invitations e.g. via the Internet, posting the information on the university webpage or web portals dedicated to science and cultural events, websites, Facebook profiles. Designing a logo is a good idea – the logo may be placed on posters, invitations, brochures or IDs – guests will associate it with the event and, with time, it may become “a trademark”,
- developing the methods of registration for participants, assembling a team of workers dedicated to supporting the guests,
- preparation of certain permissions relating to e.g. fire safety, copyrights,
- planning catering and signing deals with potential service providers,
- the team working on the event needs to make themselves acquainted with their responsibilities, roles and deadlines,
- it is a good idea to send a reminder about the event or conference to all guests,
- ways of summarizing the conference should be developed – plan out how the post-conference materials and publications will be printed out, publish photos from the event in the media, together with an informational text about it.

The above summary was useful for the students in their next task. The aim of the exercise was to plan a science conference by taking into account all the key points the students learned about earlier, as well as the logistics. The students, who were divided into groups, had a chance to exhibit their ideas and creativity, as well as their knowledge and the ability of putting it into practice. The students showed great commitment to their task. They worked in accordance with all the points discussed earlier, and, additionally, they put forward their own solutions to issues. The projects created by the students were diverse. Some of the events were planned for one day, others took two days. The students came up with ideas for many co-events. They presented the results of their work, explaining the aim of the solutions they used and encouraging others to discuss them. The lab summarizing the course about "Organization of conferences and science events" ended with an exercise on designing a certificate of participation in their conference. The students had acquainted themselves with examples of actual certificates in the earlier part of the class, discussed them and taken a critical look on the graphical design. All of this enabled them to come up with their own ideas for certificates. The commitment to creativity and the multitude of ideas let the students to draw conclusions about the aims of the course. The class ended with an evaluation survey, in which the students could present their opinions about the relevance of the subjects discussed in the class. Through the analysis of the survey it can be concluded that the topics about organization of science conferences are interesting to students. They are aware that gaining new competences makes them sought after candidates on the job market. The skills they developed during the course can prove useful in their careers. Critical analysis is useful in many life situations, relating to self-development in science, career and private life. Understanding the basics of organization events facilitates planning and makes it easier to arrange events in an interesting way. The respondents believed the subject to be exciting. They said that there should be more hours dedicated to this subject in the course. Additionally, they said that the subject matter should be expanded by discussion about law-related aspects of organization of events. One of the subject mentioned very little in the course were forms of animation and mediation of knowledge. The respondents defined these issues as interesting, due to their specialization – Animation of natural culture. They asked for these issues to be discussed more thoroughly.

Conclusions

Together with the growth of societies, there is an increase in the demand for new competences, which make it easier to feel comfortable in new fields of science, as well as professions in which the job market is fully satisfied. Animation of natural culture fills the current niche of science very well. Being able to be a part of that niche brings many new opportunities, which, up until recently, was very hard to achieve. Various competences which can be developed thanks to participation in the course may prove to be a non-trivial asset in the market of mediation and animation

of natural culture. Animation of natural culture as a groundbreaking issue requires thorough diagnosis and systematization of key concepts. Modern education should meet the expectations of the knowledge based society, which grows in a constant and multidimensional way. Various ideas and concepts interject and complement each other. Participation in labs and workshops, which can be found in the offers of modern institutions, are alternative methods of gaining and mediation of knowledge. The ability to plan and organize events or conferences opens many doors on the job markets. The awareness of the multifaceted issues related to organization of events promoting natural culture encourages seeking new solutions. What are the reasons to organize conferences? There may be many answers to this question. According to Fisher "from the outside, the most visible aspect of organized conferences are meetings of associations and training events. A conference is often chosen as a way of interaction between people from different parts of the country and enabling them to present their opinions". The wish to promote a particular institution or subject may be a separate aim, as well as propagating knowledge about niche or popular fields. Another premise are the profits – which is, of course, valid. The fact that conferences and science events can be challenging to organize remains indisputable. Therefore, it is a valid assumption that knowledge, and special competences are very useful and helpful in organizing a successful event.

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Abstract

Conferences and science events are an inseparable element of animation of science culture. They allow us to not only gain knowledge and develop interests, but they are a type of an event. According to John G Fisher “a conference is a unique medium of conveying information.” It is not just the subjects that lecturers talk about, but also the form of the conference which encourage the participation in the event. The knowledge of basics of organization, the necessity of a holistic approach to such a broad logistic undertaking, as well as creative use of said knowledge, all become a prerequisite as a competence of the modern animator of natural culture. What are the expectations of the participant of the conference? What should be the focus of the organizers when planning the event? Conferences provoke questions, which relate to not only science but also organization. The course “Organization of conferences and science events” enabled students to broaden their knowledge and gain practical skills, which they will be able to use as animators of natural culture.

Key words: organization of conferences, a conference, science events, mediation of knowledge, new competences, animation of culture.

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