

By students, for students

By Theresa Mercer

Loneliness, writers' block and demotivation are just three of many challenges faced by PhD students across all disciplines. It was this realisation that inspired me and a social-science colleague to organise an event about the experience of being a PhD student.

So great was our fellow students' interest in our idea that what we'd originally conceived as a one-day workshop run by PhD students for PhD students turned into a two-day international conference. But it wasn't simple. Organising and leading such an initiative as a student felt like a huge undertaking. And there were times when the organising committee felt that it might not work. This was particularly the case at the beginning when we had only a seed of an idea and no experience among us in how to carry on with it.

But we learned as we went. We planned sessions about the research and data-gathering experience; writing up and publishing results; getting through the viva, or dissertation defence; and finding and defining the post-PhD path. And before long, members of the organising committee and I were also adjusting bookings, applying for more money, fielding emails from attendees, keeping a budget, contacting key speakers and arranging catering. We presented our conference, The PhD Experience, from the 17th-18th of November, 2008 at the University of Hull. We had 6 keynote and theme speakers, 6 student presenters, poster presentations and 160 attendees.

This kind of student-led training helped attendees, our organisers and me to realise that so many others in the same career stage face similar experiences and emotions. While the whole endeavour was a great deal of work, at the same time I learned so much – from the conference sessions themselves, and from my experience of co-organising the whole thing. And I wasn't the only one who benefited. Many of us forged new connections beyond our specific research disciplines and discovered a way forward beyond the doctorate. Attendees told us that the conference connected them with other students from different academic and cultural backgrounds and helped them to tackle the isolation that many of us feel by providing a non-judgemental environment in which to share the pleasures and pain associated with undertaking a PhD.

All of us learned about ways to juggle academic demands with those of our personal lives, how to address common pitfalls such as procrastination during the writing process and how to maximise the elation we experience when we reach key milestones.

So what have I learned? For my part, organising and chairing the PhD Experience conference taught me useful skills and I also gained more informal insights. I feel better equipped to deal with the emotional and logistical aspects of an academic career as a physical scientist. For one thing, I know now how to put together and facilitate a conference or workshop – a responsibility that many academic researchers will have to face at some point. And while that doesn't usually involve formal training, it can be difficult to know where to start. My own experience in this area has already proven fruitful in my current post, where I have organised workshop on modelling ecosystem services for early-career academics. My team and I have set up speakers, timetables, workshop logistics and advertising, and have successfully bid for funding. The problem-solving skills I gained through organising that PhD Experience conference have helped me to deal with unforeseen circumstances such as changing workshop dates. And, having gone through all of this before, I feel more prepared and less anxious about what needs to be done, and the process feels more efficient.

The PhD Experience conference also offered valuable insights into the academic life. One was to do with writing journal articles and grant applications – I learned that procrastination is not the sole preserve of PhD students and that it strikes researchers at every stage of their career. It is crucial, it seems, to find the best time during the day to do focused work – identifying the 'golden hours' that must be blocked off in the diary and trying to get into a regular writing habit if one is to sidestep the dreaded procrastination problem.

I also learned that many of us share another common issue -- the need to adopt a process around peer review that provides time to work through the emotions it produces, and to learn to view it as constructive criticism rather than as a personal attack. I have first-hand experience of receiving very positive comments about a manuscript, as well as the sting of a flat-out rejection. I once sent one manuscript to 8 different reviewers and it underwent 3 rounds of reviews before it was finally accepted. It was difficult to juggle all the different, and sometimes contradictory, opinions. But the conference taught me to adopt a steely determination, to deal with peer-review comments objectively -- and carry on.

In the PhD Experience conference, we had researcher-speakers from a variety of backgrounds. Some were mature students, with previous work experience. Knowing this, and finding out from talking with them or hearing their presentations about how they adjusted to re-entering academia, has encouraged me to feel free to take a more meandering academic journey and to be involved in research projects that I truly enjoy.

The bonds you create at an event designed as a platform to share common experiences are strong. I am still in contact with student speakers from the conference, many of whom now have academic careers. One close friend who presented at the conference now has an academic career abroad. We are cheerleaders for each other and provide a sympathetic ear when one of us faces problems. We also share networks, tips and relevant events with each other as we learn about living and working as an academic.

I am also in contact with members of the organising committees, some of whom ran the event in subsequent years. We have a shared interest in researcher development and student-led training and have published on these topics since our experience of running the conference as students.

Whilst universities and research councils may provide research training for the PhD, there is no substitute for learning and experiencing the process with your peers. The nature of PhDs is constantly changing and evolving. Students are now expected to come out of the process with more than just the technical knowledge of their field.

While I don't necessarily advocate for every PhD student to conceive, organise and produce a conference, I believe that there is much to gain by getting involved in student-led training, even if only as an attendee of such an event. You will learn softer skills such as finding ways to deal with difficult situations and emotions in the workplace and being able to relate to colleagues that you will find invaluable in whatever your future career may be. I learned organisational and problem-solving skills, got insight into manuscript writing and the peer-review process and discovered how to build work/life balance and valuable networks, without question. And I also came away with an appreciation for and greater understanding of the power of working together and sharing common experiences and emotions within the PhD process.

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