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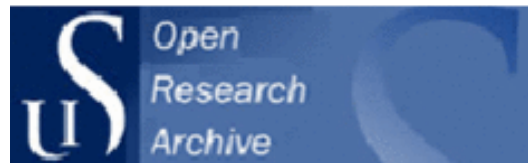
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What do conferences do? What is academics' intangible return on investment (ROI) from attending an academic tourism conference?

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Conferences are funny events; they are self-evident elements of our lives as academics, often annually occurring meetings of, hopefully, like-minded people, aimed at sharing the latest research findings, or so we at least say, and taking place in different locations. Conferences are actually so self-evident that very little research exist that analyse what takes place in conferences, why people attend them in the first place, and essentially what the conference does to you as a participant. This article is on the one hand a reflective report from an academic conference – *TEFI 9 – Celebrating the Disruptive Power of Caring in Tourism Education*, but simultaneously an analysis of the implicit and explicit rationale and return on investment for attending academic conferences, in the words of three, at that time, PhD candidates, and one rapporteur who acts as this article's narrator.

Introduction

The focus of TEFI's (Tourism Education Futures Initiative) ninth conference that was held in Kamloops, BC, in late June 2016 at Thompson Rivers University, was to 'Celebrate the Disruptive Power of Caring in Tourism Education'. Now care and caring are words with great power, and with lots of weakness included simultaneously. To care for others is something we generally admire (in others), and fear (in ourselves). We are afraid of the personal vulnerability that comes with the act of caring – i.e. subordinating ourselves to the needs of somebody else, who hasn't got the power, or skills, to care for themselves, and the respect we have for those who have accepted the role, while still retain a strong facade. Already, setting up a conference with this theme requires lots of courage – who dares to care, and who cares to attend?

Luckily, the TEFI network includes a global community of scholars who are interested in the future of tourism education, how it evolves, and how it can shape the lives of future tourism professionals, and society generally. The underlying values of TEFI; *knowledge*, *professionalism*, *ethics*, *mutuality*; and, *stewardship*, are all directly, or indirectly, related to care. Elder Mike Arnouse, from the local Secwepemc people of interior British Columbia, reminded participants, in his opening address of the conference, that "lots of knowledge existed amongst our people before, but has been forgotten – now it is re-discovered, and given Greek names … some of the things we knew, are allowed again; [amongst them] care for the land, and care for the water".

TEFI 9 follows the earlier TEFI gatherings in setting focussed, and timely themes for the participant to work around. It is with apprehension we call TEFI gatherings conferences, because hidden in the word *conference* come so many preconceived ideas about how they take place, and what to expect from them. TEFI gatherings have always been different because they are small, active, and full of workshops and break-out sessions. They are called conferences for simple reasons: they can get institutional support, and academics can receive funding to attend them, as long as they fulfil some criteria set for conferences (Parker & Weik, 2014): The institutionally set criteria are often that participants can present their work, in different ways, they can listen to engaging key-note speakers, and there are commonly good opportunities to get own work published in special issues of journals, or in edited books. We will continue referring to the TEFI gatherings as conferences, but we will in the article define what we consider a conference to be, and what it should and could be.

That TEFI 9 had as its theme to 'celebrate the disruptive power of caring' is a clear marker stating that much of current tourism education is not *caring* per se. Our competitive and managerialised university societies are inundated by ranking tables, impact factors, star-ratings, and individual rewards for 'high-performing' people. – Care is, however, not high on the agenda in that environment. It has even been suggested that care is something the professionalised university and its employees are avoiding (Parker & Weik, 2014). But if individuals do care, for others, for their students, for society, and for their own well-being, then it is a powerful disruption in the egoistic environment we have all chosen to act within. Care is not about being a

'tree-hugging do-gooder with one's head in the clouds', it is about a conscious choice anybody can make, to simply not accept being a relatively useless 'cog' in a neoliberal non-caring academic 'machine'. The chair of TEFI, Dianne Dredge raised that very point in her opening address, asking us to: "get away from tourism education as only consumptive … get back to our values as 'passionate and courageous' individuals … How can we care, and disrupt, together?"

All we do in life takes some time and effort, some more, some less, and the choice we make, to do, or not to do anything, is often based on our conscious or unconscious calculations of what the return is we get from that act – essentially a return on investment (ROI) for time and effort. Attending a conference requires both time, effort, and money – and the question at the end of any conference should therefore be: 'Personally, what was the ROI for me to attend this conference'? There is also the flip-side of that coin, when deciding to travel to a conference, away from home, work, and other responsibilities – who takes care of the domestic and professional chores left behind, and is the ROI of the conference attendance high enough to compensate for that loss of immediate care? That is what this article sets out to query, in the words of three budding academics.

Literature review

In order to understand what the ROI can be of attending a conference, we need to understand the ontology of conferences, and conference attendance. Building on the important work by Franklin, who presented a 're-ordering' of tourism studies, where the ontological question of tourism, as a change agent in society, cannot be grasped with the simplistic question "What tourism is", but rather by asking "What tourism does" (Franklin, 2008), we ask here: "What a conference does"? This seemingly simple change of verbs makes a large difference, because it releases us from the shackles of purely imagining conferences as uncomplicated entities.

A brief literature review of the research that has been done about academic conferences, shows that they do feature as the theme, or as a component, in a range of research outputs. There are four overarching groups in research output, featuring conferences;

Table 1: Key themes of academic conference research

a) *subjects*	b) *objects*	c) *experiences*	d) *stages*
something to manage	reified entities (as if they would be objects)	spaces participants are thrown into	metaphors for society where participants perform roles

Tourism conference research tends to fall into the first or the second group, perceiving conferences as *subjects* or *objects*. This is congruent to ontologically asking what a conference <u>is</u>.

The first group, conferences as *subjects*, is a whole field of managerial articles that investigate, for example, how to make conferences run smoothly (Chen & Liang, 2007; Wei, Lu, Miao, Cai, & Wang, 2017), how to create value-added services in relation to conferences (Cox, Kindratenko, & Pointer, 2003), and how to create segments so that conferences can be marketed properly (Mair, 2010, 2014; Rittichainuwat, Beck, & Lalopa, 2001). A large body of research has naturally been done in events management that could fit into this category. However, as their emphasis is more on events or conferences as the subject of management action, not as an analysis of the intricacies of academic conferences, they were deemed not to be part of this literature review.

The second group, conferences as *objects*, is also a rather large number of research output that are objectifying conferences and investigate matters like different types of sessions, lectures, posters and Q&As (Dimitrios, Sakas, & Vlachos, 2014). This second group contain also content analysis of conference presentations, full conferences, or even conference series (Genoe McLaren, 2007; Thatcher, 2006), conference reports (Wilson & Small, 2013), as well as research on environmental concerns for travelling to conferences, and whether they should rather be carried out digitally (Høyer, 2009; Høyer & Naess, 2001). An interesting feature in this group were articles focusing on academic tourism conferences published in the 1990s, in which the authors were lamenting on the low value conferences provided participants in terms of academic rigour and new research presented (Hobson, 1993; Leslie, 1995; Oppermann, 1997). The critique that was offered back then can still be heard and felt

at conferences today. The same one-way discussions, too tight program, too little time for questions, and too much regurgitated research outcomes, are still a norm at way too many conferences (Laroche, 2014), it seems that an unfortunately small number of conference organisers have actually read the papers, or cared to critically evaluate what it is they want to achieve at their conferences. A positive deviation from the rule was Castronova's article that started off by highlighting how formulaic and boring conferences generally are, but then went on to give an alternative that turns the event into a productive and fun experience for participants (Castronova, 2013).

Looking at the third group, conferences as *experiences*, a large portion of research, especially in the field of linguistics, take as their interest, for example, participants' performance anxiety ahead of presentations (Hood & Forey, 2005; Rowley, 2012; Ventola, Shalom, & Thompson, 2002), how social media and Twitter are used ahead, and during, conferences amongst participants (Ross, Terras, Warwick, & Welsh, 2011). This group, with conferences as experiences, are also interested in how conferences manage to create valuable community participation (Graham & Kormanik, 2004) and how conference attendees' partners are making sense of their experiences when joining along on conference journeys (Yoo, 2014). Mair and Frew (2016) have also published an exciting duo-ethnographic article about conferences from a female perspective, looking at meanings of attending a conference. Apart from the thesis by Yoo, and the article by Mair and Frew, no research that this review came across investigated academic tourism conferences as experiences. It seems as if they simply are mundane parts of our life as academics, but not something that is worthy of examination in themselves.

The final group of research output investigate conferences as *stages* where roles are performed. This contains, for example, articles concerned with gender inclivity and sexual harassment (Bell & King, 2010; Blumen & Bar-Gal, 2006; Ford & Harding, 2010; Ratliff, 2012), the feeling of belonging, or not, to the mainstream of one's academic field (Ren, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2010), as well as research on career advancement due to conference participation (Oppermann, 1997; Sharma, Parikh, & Fordyce, 2016). There are a few articles in this group that aren't focused specifically on conferences, but rather reflect on the fact that the article took its form from the authors' feelings at conferences attended (Ateljevic, Harris, Wilson, & Collins, 2005).

This final group is of interest also from a TEFI perspective, in the light of a report published 2015 about the power imbalance between genders in tourism academia. The report succinctly points out how conferences, in a similar fashion to academic journals, are biased to awarding higher status positions, such as invited keynote speeches, and honorary chair positions, to men rather than to women (Munar et al., 2015). The report has also a guideline for conference organisers how to take gender equity in consideration in the planning and operation of conferences. This inevitably links to reasoning on how gender is performed rather than existent in each individual (Butler, 1990) and how identities are not simply either of two within a bipolar spectra but rather the result of intertwined facets, as discussed in the contributions in Berger and Guidroz (2009). By attending a conference in person, each attendant subjects oneself to the judgement of the collective, as well as individual judgement, of others, be it based on gender, age, appearance or number of publications in high ranked journals.

Returning to TEFI 9, we need to point out that this literature review was done after the reflections from the participants had been written. As the reflections had been gathered and read, they all turned out to present reflexions on being part of a community where the roles are cast due to disciplinary as well as hierarchical labelling. The reflections thus fit nicely into the third group above, experiences, and also in the common rationale conference attendees state for why they attend specific conferences: 'keeping up with changes in my profession', 'hearing speakers who are respected experts in the field', 'developing new professional relationships', and 'learning new skills' (Oppermann, 1997), and we will therefore use these statements as headings for the reflections below. We will, however, simultaneously consider the ontology of conference attendance – what a conference does, and why people attend them. Fragments of reflections, conference presentations, and research will be interspersed with one another in this section.

Rationale for conference attendance and reflections

Let's put it on the table immediately, a strong rationale for attending conferences is purely egoistic: we get to travel to wonderful places, partly of wholly financed by our

employers, we get to further our careers by presenting our thoughts and work to people who might have powers to open doors for us, and it is often a darn good party with dance, music, good food and drinks, in the company of likeminded people (Hobson, 1993). There is so much to like in conferences that the explanations we create to make it sound arduous is to fulfil some nagging work-ethic corner of our minds that tell us we have to be productive in our working lives. But it is not just conferences that are like this, we do live quite blessed lives as academics, ok – probably not so much of the travel and parties, but definitely the company of likeminded people (others who value intellectual stimulation like we do), and furthering our own work, our own thoughts, our own interest as our livelihood (Parker & Weik, 2014). Though, inside all of this sits the word 'power', and that was a theme Dianne Dredge touched upon in her presentation together with her colleague Martin Tandberg.

Dianne and Martin had started thinking about the 'lived experience of academia', and the pressure it put on their professional vs. private lives. Their presentation; '*Phenomenology of bibliometrics in tourism*' stemmed from a discussion where Martin told he had received an automated email telling that Dianne was the most cited colleague at their department. They realised that bibliometrics are omnipresent in our lives as academics; we copy the behaviour of our colleagues, we embody the guilt of not doing enough, and we transfer bibliometrics forward by adding accomplishments and H-index factors to our email signatures. Essentially we 'become what they make of us' – and this can easily lead to feelings of inadequacy. The realisation that we are impacted by bibliometrics regardless if we are interested in them or not lead Dianne and Martin to a formulation of three approaches how to deal with it; a utilitarian, an ideological, and a humanistic, each with their own copying strategies. And the 'metricsation' of our lives as academics is in a similar fashion part of conferences, the invited key-notes, the eminent scholars who continue coming to conferences long after retiring, are all part of socialising young academics to an approved ontology and a covert axiology of academia (Bell & King, 2010).

But then again, our academic life has lots of freedom too, we do not have to go to all conferences that are arranged to further our careers, we pick and choose those that fit our way of thinking, and feature colleagues we work with, or whose works we build upon – as well as colleagues who build upon the work we do, and whose careers we

might further. Gross and Fleming states; 'Participation in academic life requires a long training and apprenticeship during the course of which bodies of knowledge are passed along to novices, who are also socialized into their fields' norms, values, knowledge-making practices, and epistemic cultures. (Gross & Fleming, 2011, p. 155-156). This was a theme that Troy Glover brought along in his keynote presentation at the TEFI 9 conference; '*No act of kindness is wasted*'. Troy talked about the growth of social capital as a 'consequence of investment in, and cultivation of, social relationships'. He told a wonderful narrative laced with examples from along his career as a student, researcher, and professor, where he had experienced events of non-normative kindness that had grabbed him, or others, by amazement. He called it a model of eudemonic capital; paying forward kindness. The reason for this was simple; 'fear is not productive', it makes us act in a reactive fashion, and because the process of academia is to an ever larger degree de-humanized, we need to bring back humanity in kindness. Troy quoted the Greek philosopher Aesop: "No act of kindness, no matter how small, is wasted" in reminding us that you have to be willing to both give care / kindness, and to receive it.

Three PhD candidates participating in TEFI9 were asked to reflect on their experiences at the conference. They were not given any guidelines as to what to focus on, the freedom to think back and highlight matters of importance gives the article its empirics:

X2: There is poetry to be written using only the themes of international academic conferences. Themes that aim at attracting those at the cutting edge, but keeping an inclusive, welcoming touch. The space filled with those words are often like miniature images, depicting the field of research with much sharper contours and brighter colours than can be achieved in the researching practice. And just as poetry, the themes awaken lines of thoughts and aspirations within the potential participators. As the conference evolves, the focus and will of the organizers merge with the participants' presence and professional contributions into a shared experience that can only to a certain extent be envisioned and directed by the conference organizers – the poets.

Keeping up with changes in my profession

X1: *Celebrating the Disruptive Power of Caring*, a conference theme that I found disruptive in its self, uncommon to many of the academic conferences I have attended. I must say I was initially suspicious of what the outcome of the conference will be. Little did I know, it had the propensity to change my life … to set the stage … for a rookie, PhD Candidate … a future academic. As a note-taker, I hardly missed anything said at the conference. Eyes and attention were glued to each speaker. You see, I wondered, how you can use the word *care*, without, considering *emotions*? And when you consider *emotions*, then you are suggesting other words like *love*, in a conference theme, which does not in itself seem very academic. This was my own personal internal battle because in academia I somehow perceived – or you get the impression – that you should not show emotions. So even in my own classroom, I became a phony so that I can live up to those perceived 'academic' expectations. For me in so many ways, TEFI9 conference was extremely liberating as I listened to senior academics talk about caring for students, caring for oneself, caring for one's family, caring for 'the other' and instituting care in pedagogical practice. A few academics who I had met at my first TEFI conference two years ago also captured the spirit of my heart.

The theme of the conference was indeed an integral part of the whole experiences, the team at Thompson Rivers University, led by Kellee Caton had taken the idea of care to new lengths. It is rare that this is done, I'm sure we have all attended conferences with a theme like 'hospitality' that is totally devoid of any hospitality in the word's actual sense, or similar. Journeys and travel away from home have naturally also an opposite effect in terms of care. Parker and Weik remind us: 'It is often unclear, to outsiders or participants, just what sort of work is being done at conferences but whatever the account, common to them all is the idea that there is an *imperative* to get away from home. It isn't expressed like that, but that's what it means, because academics rarely attend conferences with their children, spouses, elderly relatives or pets. They tend to leave their cares behind, in the hands of their partner or extended family' (Parker & Weik, 2014, p. 170). With this in mind, it should be stated that TEFI9 also had program for partners who had come along, though, many others surely did not come along, and the focus on care at the conference meant in that case that some care had to be given to others to perform at home.

X2: The TEFI 9 conference in Kamloops in June 2016 was an event where a well formulated theme did not only attract attention but also sustained its message throughout all stages of planning and execution. *The disruptive power of care* was in the first call for contributions stated as a theme for "four days of intellectual growth and community-building for tourism higher education". This was not intended as a general reference for writing abstracts for contributions at the conference, but rather stating an atmosphere that infused every moment of the four days. And evenings.

Keeping up with changes in one's profession is to a large degree about constructing a professional identity that one is satisfied with self, and is fulfilling some criteria one has set for oneself. Because it is very seldom that this is overtly spoken about: what it means to be a qualified academic? Konzett notes: 'delegates who actively participate in these interactions, whether as presenters, chairpersons or as members of the audience, carry out a considerable amount of identity work, attributing self and other to various categories of professional identity. The discussion participants co-construct themselves and each other discursively as academics, professionals, experts, junior or senior members of the scientific community' (Konzett, 2012, p. 5). Sure, a PhD degree is in many cases seen as a 'driver's licence', it is for many the minimum criteria for interacting on the scene. Work in the field, publications, competitive grants, teaching, community interaction, services to the university, are all then coming along; but they are still just actions, they do not describe what the person should be like. This is where identity construction takes place, we might have some role model we are trying to emulate, we see what colleagues do, we copy and we try to stay á jour with the latest changes, so that we can feel that we are professional. This is why we decide whether or not it is worthwhile participating in different conferences, does the theme talk to me, and will enable me to keep up with changes in my chosen field?

Hearing speakers who are respected experts in the field

X2: TEFI 9 offered a schedule of intangible planks that both permeated and were separated from the official programme. The message of TEFI, formulated as the importance of creating balance between the hosts and actors of the tourism industry, was enunciated but also shown in practice by the collaboration between the hosting

department, their students and the local community. However, as elaborated upon in the welcoming blessing by elder Mike Arnouse, the difference between host and guest created within the tourism system, holds only a cosmetic relevance. In accordance with elder Arnouse's introduction and Kellee Caton's opening meditations held each morning during the conference, there was an underlying understanding of all present being part of the same body and spirit.

'Respected experts' is such a value-laden expression, and still, it is something attendants at conferences often state as the reason to participate, or maybe in a modernist research culture; it is the given alternative on a research form that many participants tick (Blumen & Bar-Gal, 2006). As mentioned earlier, the 2015 TEFI report in gender power imbalance and the reoccurring discussions on Trinet (an academic tourism forum), relating to all male-panels of experts, or keynote speakers, is directly relevant to this. Who is it that is respected in our academic community? Who is it that has the time and opportunity to get away from their daily care of family, students, and institutional responsibilities? Well, in many cases it seems that it is the same people turning up around the globe, and in a worst case scenario gives the same speech to somewhat different audiences (Hobson, 1993).

Good conferences contain thought provoking presentations that are leading to *change* – this might not always be immediate, but by challenging our perceptions of reality we have the opportunity to *grow*, and to *transform* thanks to new thought paths that have been created in the conference environment. This is only possible where keynotes come from a diverse background, as similar people think too alike. Kellee Caton, as TEFI 9's convener, had done an excellent job in inviting respected experts from a diverse background, including; an Indigenous elder, young career researchers; industry representatives, and seasoned professors – all with keynotes that built and extended upon the conference theme and ethos.

X1: In this reflection, I can share with you that the entire proceedings resonated with me, consciously or unconsciously. At the very opening, a welcome from Elder Mike Arnouse, a wise leader of the indigenous community in Kamloops, confronted my ignorance on issues related to indigenous people especially as it relates to the respect to nature and the land. I attended the conference with one of my supervisors, Dr. X4,

to present our research findings on '*University Best Practice and Indigenous Human Rights in Tourism*'. Based on Elder Mike's provocative welcome speech, I realized how important it is to understand deeper perspectives and research context. His speech and presence really aided me to understand a level of complexity that I would have never understood otherwise.

Developing new professional relationships

A commonly stated reason why attendants have chosen to come to one or another conference is to network, to get to meet new people who are active in the same field as one is, and who might be working on similar matters as one is right then, or might be interested in going into at a later stage. Conferences offer physical locations to interact, share ideas, and learn how the whole academic system works (Murray, 2007). Conferences are places of socialisation, each participant is given attention and access to discussions in ways that resembles academic life generally (Lindley, 2009; Nicolson, 2017). But all conferences, or maybe rather conference delegates, are not equally supportive – there is always a risk in presenting one's own work – what if somebody decides that they will make a name of themselves by disproving your ideas? Like all social situations, conferences host individuals with their own agendas, thrown into a common place to act, and interact according to their own needs, wants and ethics (Ford & Harding, 2008).

X2: As a doctoral candidate within the X5 system of higher education, you are obliged to attend at least two international conferences during your training. The purpose for this is stated as conferences offering the opportunity to present and get feedback on your own work, listen to others presenting their research and to network in a social as well as professional way. Thus you embark on a journey that starts with the frightening moment of your first presentation. When your blood freeze as you realize that the main reference on your slide 'Theoretical Framework' is in the room. In flesh and blood.

Gross and Fleming states: 'Conference attendance is not simply about traveling the world, seeing old friends, keeping up with the latest academic gossip, or staying abreast of recent intellectual developments. It is also about forcing one self, at the risk

of considerable embarrassment if one does not do so in time, to transform an abstract idea or plan for a paper into a more concrete text that can be presented orally, and whose argumentative power, and potential to make a significant contribution, can be gauged on the basis of audience reaction' (2011, p. 152). What Gross and Fleming refers to, is the fact that many seasoned conference attendants decide to participate in conferences merely based on other factors fitting the purpose, such as the timing is favourable, the location is desirable, funding is available, or it is an annual event for the research community (thematic, geographic, or whatever) one belongs to. Conference abstracts are therefore created in haste to fit the theme based on some idea one might be working on, and the actual content of the presentation is not taking shape until a very late stage, in some cases the evening before the presentation. The feedback on the presentation is therefore an important indicator if the idea one had is of relevance to the greater academic community. Academics, as knowledge producers, are always faced with the same problem: 'to obtain sufficient understanding of what is happening in her field […] and not to be pre-empted in her findings by others' (Gross & Fleming, 2011, p. 155).

X3: This was my first time attending TEFI conference and I found this event very sociable and a great opportunity for networking. I met many researchers and practitioners who were very active in the field of tourism and social entrepreneurship, and look forward to collaborating with them in the near future.

X2: The organizers and their team of contributors managed to convert their plan into a collective performance based on their belief in the power of caring and sharing. How else could one explain the fact that a large group of individuals, of whom many had never met before, during their first hours together shared the tranquillity of contemplating the outlines of a flower? On their fourth day together the same group filled a room with voices as they spoke from their hearts about things that are seldom said out loud. In between those moments were parallel sessions, common recreational activities and thought provoking key notes that brought forth discussions on teaching practices as well as the basic ethics of life.

To develop professional relationships, to network, means that one has to risk a little of oneself, to give away some ideas, and potentially show a little of one's ignorance of

matters. But, in a caring environment, this means to find like-minded people who can mentor one's thoughts further, acknowledge what one already has achieved, and encourage new ideas to take shape, and to learn about other researchers whose work will be interesting to follow in the future.

Learning new skills

Advertent, or inadvertent, adherence to protestant work ethics, commonly lead people to search for some concrete utility in both work and leisure tasks they take on. Tourist attractions are often seen as being worthwhile when they contain elements that inform and teach tourists new information about any matter (Edelheim, 2015). Similarly, conferences are considered to be places one go to in order to hear about new research development, stay atop of the latest research findings, and to learn new skills (Rowley, 2012).

X3: TEFI had a great balance between discussions on teaching and research. The topic of 'Care' was very relevant to me as a young academic and I enjoyed exploring 'Care' from many different angles over the course of the conference. The conference also covered the pioneering social entrepreneurship activities in higher education environment, including international volunteering opportunities for academic staff and extra curriculum events for university students to come up with useful social innovations. I was impressed and hoped to adopt these activities in Australian higher education in the near future.

X1: My understanding of the complexity of the issue, of respect for the land, and original people of the land, was further enlightened when Gudrun Andrews presented her transformational research on '*Unfolding the Truth: Can We Learn about Canadian Indigenous History in Today's Educational System*'. It was a lesson from Little Learners Preschool. Often in the simplest things in life is packaged the most confrontational lessons. This pre-school educator had her students draw their favorite places. After they were finished, she added picture frames that covered significant portions of the picture, to the point where they could no longer enjoy their picture of their favorite places. Prior to presenting her findings, Andrews had a conference attendee take some time to draw her favorite place, while the audience sat back

enjoying her art. After this entertaining session the Pre-School educator also added small picture frames that covered the beauty and perspective of the picture. This raised the emotions of the audience. Then she explained that this very feeling that we had, is that which is experienced by indigenous people of Canada, as their lands have been taken away. Her pre-school children also comprehended those emotions. It is then I realized the greater meaning to the work that I have been doing in regards to indigenous people. It erected a permanent care for them, and highlighted my role with a mission for impactful research.

X2: Some participants may have had their work flavoured by new words and ideas whereas others may have been strengthened in their ongoing pursuit for the new and inclusive tourism academy that is TEFI's strive. Yet another participant may even have experienced being pushed over the threshold into a community and way of thinking that she had sensed but not yet dared entering. Boosted by a power that disrupted her work but at the same time made it so much more true to her belief in the possibility of creating a better tomorrow.

Learning takes many different shapes, just like teaching does, because each individual, teacher or student, presenter or audience, has different ways of making sense of reality. The important thing is in any case to reflect on what the learning aspect of any one conference one attends. If one comes to the end of a conference and one realises that one has not learned anything at all, then it is probably a great lesson – not to attend a similar conference again.

What a conference does

A conference provides participants with a confluence of thoughts, links between different related themes, which are all evoked through the concentration of related topics that lead to new ideas and thought patterns:

X2: From there you travel through parallel sessions and key note talks. Constantly taking notes, hoping to be able to bring, if so only a fraction of it all, into your own work. Until one evening when you lay down on your hotel bed, and the words, smiles, and thoughts rumbling in your head are not only reminiscent of formal presentations

and lecturing, but also from chats and discussions that happened in between, and after the scheduled events. The intangible effects of coming together with others.

Conferences are definitely not just a mental process, as participants we are bodies and minds, and a conference that involves participants' bodies too, will always be more memorable. Bodily activities should not be seen as a distraction from 'real program', they should be nestled into the program as compulsory themed occasions, as 'presentations' but in a different mode:

X3: My absolute highlight of the conference, however, was when we spent the last day engaging in various wellness activities. I have done mindfulness practices and yoga exercises before, but the beautiful venue and excellent instructors took the experience to a whole new level. Attending TEFI truly enriched my PhD experience and I left the conference not only equipped with more knowledge but also feeling refreshed and hopeful for a caring future of academia.

Facts and figures are important to prove points, but they are seldom reaching very deep inside us as persons – in order to connect with people you need to reach their emotions, this holds true regardless if we talk about families, students, or colleagues. And, this is where the idea of care, and caring returns – they are emotional responses to personal situations:

X1: From this conference, I realized that learning really occurs as our emotions are tampered with. Then it is really difficult to forget. I also learnt that caring is allowed and it has a disruptive power in helping others to learn, grow and flourish … not to mention the importance of caring for one self's continuous learning and growth. TEFI9, a celebration of the disruptive power of care was to me, very emancipating. Thank you to all the organizers for one of the best conferences I have attended, thanks for sharing so much that you can impact the lives of young academics, and thank you to my supervisor for encouraging me to attend and taking me there.

Conclusion

The ROI of attending a conference could therefore be summed up by listing what it does to us as participants, and conversely, a good conference can be judged on how many of these matters that has happened at a conference we have attended.

Each and every time we attend a conference we are simultaneously constructing our own *identities* as academics – the things we do, the sessions we attend, the questions we ask, and refrain from asking, the connections we develop, the ensuing research we work on are all part of making us into what we think of ourselves, and what others think of us.

Selecting conferences that are relevant to one's own research interests and philosophy is of importance, because the *connections* one makes listening to other researchers presentations, but equally much by the conversations one has between the sessions, at coffee and meal breaks, is a real return on investment for attendance. The networks one creates at conferences can open more doors in careers than any one high 'ranked' journal publication can, when people know you, they can think of you when a job opening comes up, or when a suitable research grant is being written. This article thus contributed a rather unique, and often neglected perspective, to understanding academic conferences.

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