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Bursting onto the Big Stage: Presenting at an International Conference for the First Time

Carla Meijen & Andrew Manley

Attending a prestigious international conference and contributing to proceedings by delivering a poster or oral presentation is an excellent opportunity for sport and exercise psychology students to gain valuable experience and meet people from different parts of the world. In this article, we will focus on presenting at an international conference for the first time. An international conference presents different challenges compared to annual national and regional conferences. It will often be held in another country, and may be organised once every four years. There are likely to be a larger number of delegates, a broader variety of topics, and usually an array of established names amongst the list of attendees and presenters.

Additionally, for presenters who are not native English speakers, the perceived language barrier may instil feelings of discomfort. In this article, we will discuss our experiences of presenting at the 2007 FEPSAC conference in Halkidiki, Greece, highlighting the lessons we have learned and how others can benefit from our reflections on the event.

Preparation

In preparing the presentation, consideration of timing is all-important. While this is not as vital an issue for poster presentations, the success of oral presentation sessions as a whole depends on the presenters being economical with the time they are allocated. The first thing to check is the duration specified for each oral presentation

at the conference in question. This may vary depending on whether you are presenting as part of a parallel session or a symposium, and may also be determined by the number of presenters within your session. For example, although the FEPSAC website specified that oral presentations should be no longer than 15 minutes with 5 minutes for questions, several sessions that were scheduled for 90 minutes included a total of six speakers, thus drastically cutting down the time allotted for each presenter.

It is also advisable to find out what resources will be available at the conference. By resources, we mean the equipment that can be used to facilitate your poster or oral presentation (e.g., adjustable stands, audio-visual computer programmes, available space). Make sure that the format you use, particularly with regard to computer programmes, is compatible with those on offer at the conference. It is also useful to be aware of the equipment available for delegates wishing to make any last-minute amendments to their presentation. However, it is not advisable to rely on the provision of such resources on site, and sufficient preparation and checking of the presentation content is strongly recommended prior to arrival at the conference. Regarding the poster presentation, allow yourself plenty of time to finish the poster. If required, ensure that someone familiar with editing can assist with the final touches of the poster.

Practicing the presentation before the big day is an absolute must. Even when the topic is relatively familiar, it may be difficult to convey your research findings effectively without sufficient rehearsal, particularly under conditions of limited time and extensive scrutiny. The amount of practice required will vary from person to person, but at least one “dry run”, preferably in front of a critical pilot audience (e.g., your supervisor, peers), will often help to enhance the presentation in terms of time-keeping, style, and clarity. Aids such as cue cards or prompts may be useful, but

again, their effectiveness can vary depending on the individual. The bottom line is to practice using various tools and techniques before settling on whatever works best for you. It is also good practise to think about the kinds of questions that other delegates might ask in response to your presentation, thus adding a sense of control to the less predictable aspects of presenting.

Delivery

Provided sufficient time and effort has been invested in preparing for the event, the actual delivery of the presentation should not represent much of a problem. However, it is natural for presenters to experience bouts of anxiety before and during the presentation, particularly if it is his or her first on the international stage. Whether delivering an oral or poster presentation, the presenter can help deal with such nerves and enhance the quality of the presentation by following a few simple rules. First, taking a few deep breaths before beginning can help to calm the presenter down. The speaker should also remember that they do not need to rush; speak slowly and clearly. Taking a drink of water to the poster area or lectern can also help prevent “drying up”, whilst also offering the presenter the option to stop and recompose themselves during the presentation if required.

Competing for a conference award (e.g., the Young Investigator’s Award at FEPSAC) adds an extra element to a presentation, particularly the poster session. In addition to questions from delegates, a competing presenter will spend a sizeable amount of the time speaking to the judges. Various questions may arise based on the poster, whether expected or unexpected. The poster sessions allow delegates to ask several questions, and to discuss the study in relation to their own research. At FEPSAC, such interaction resulted in the initiation of various contacts based on

common research interests and discussions to expand the study to other cultures/sports.

Aftermath /Benefits of presenting at this conference

Following a presenter's inaugural presentation at a large international conference, it is natural for him or her to experience a myriad of thoughts and emotions. Some presenters may feel overwhelming relief that the experience is over, regardless of whether they thought they presented well or not. Others might experience a distinct sense of pride and achievement, while it is also common for presenters to be self-critical immediately following their presentation. Such reflection following the experience of presenting at a prestigious international conference can be worthwhile, provided it is constructive and used primarily as a learning exercise. Taking stock of the presentation experience can be a useful developmental tool, allowing for the identification of benefits gained and lessons learned. As well as self-reflection, the opinions of members of the audience can also be of great value as a means of enhancing presentation skills. However, it is important to remember that any critical points are usually intended as helpful hints rather than a personal slight.

Another benefit to be gained from presenting at an international conference is the resulting exposure for the presenter and their associated research. An event such as FEPSAC affords the presenter the opportunity to communicate their interests and findings on a global scale, thus providing the chance to address a more culturally diverse population than might be found at smaller national conferences. Presenting at international events not only raises the research profile of the delegate, but also brings their work to the attention of academics and practitioners who hold similar interests. Such exposure often results in the forging of useful contacts, which commonly prove

to be invaluable sources of information and inspiration, potentially leading to opportunities for collaborative research.

Some international conferences are keen to acknowledge and reward the presentations of young researchers as a means of encouraging newcomers to the international stage to continue with their work. FEPSAC's Young Investigator's Award, mentioned earlier, is an example of such an incentive for novice presenters. The winners of the 2007 accolade were presented with a financial reward and diploma at the closing ceremony, demonstrating that there are also material benefits to be gained from throwing your hat into the ring at an international conference.

Learning points

As previously mentioned, the experience of delivering poster and oral presentations provided us with some valuable lessons to take away and apply to future events. One aspect seemed to frequently emerge; preparation is key. Regarding poster presentations, points to take into consideration are to have copies of the poster available, and make sure that people know how to get in touch with you. Moreover, have various people, both from within and outside your topic area, to look at your poster before you print it out. Consequently, spelling errors are less likely to be overlooked, and any misleading features of the poster can be clarified. In terms of both oral and poster presentations, do not worry if you have to leave out some information. This is an inevitable part of presenting data that is often complex within a short time frame. Concentrate on the key issues before deciding if there is enough time to elaborate on certain points. Remember, if people really want to know more about a particular aspect of your work, they will either ask a question during the session, or approach you afterwards. However do make sure that you prepare the parts that can be left out.

An aspect related to preparation is to “sell” yourself. There are various ways of doing so. First, try to think of an attractive title for your poster or oral presentation. The title is the first thing someone would look at on a poster or slide. The subtitle serves the purpose of explaining what the study is about. Second, try to keep the information short and concise. Most delegates want to know what your study is about in less than a few minutes. For instance, when there is a large amount of information on a poster, or when this information is unclear (i.e., small letter size), delegates may become less attracted to the poster, unless they are particularly interested in the topic. However, make sure that the information you have put on the poster covers the key points. Do not overly confuse people by leaving essential information out. Third, do not be afraid to approach delegates who seem to be interested in your presentation! You never know what may come out of such conversations. A poster presentation in particular is an excellent way to network.

General comments

In summary, presenting at an international conference is an activity that has a lot to offer sport and exercise psychology students. In the developmental sense, it provides novice presenters with an opportunity to enhance their presentation skills, get their ideas publicised on a global scale, and obtain invaluable feedback from a knowledgeable, multinational audience. From a competitive perspective, it often affords newcomers the chance to pit themselves against their peers by contesting for internationally recognised honours.

However, just as international conferences are a vehicle for young researchers to disseminate information regarding their own work, events such as FEPSAC are also a chance for sport and exercise psychologists in the early years of their career to

learn from more experienced researchers and practitioners. The presentations of established academics and professionals across the various sub-disciplines of sport and exercise psychology provide an interactive experience from which we as students can learn a great deal. A useful trick is to try and attend sessions and symposia devoted to areas of interest that overlap your own. Such presentations may not only provide interesting ideas for future investigation, but also offer the chance to promote your own research to other interested parties. Remember that presenting your work is only part of the experience of attending a conference. Take some time to read through the abstracts and decide which sessions you want to attend, as a conference of this size offers plenty of interesting sessions that may take place simultaneously. Reading the abstracts beforehand may help you to be better prepared, and to benefit even more from the conference. Involvement in the social programme of an international conference is also highly recommended. Not only is this an additional and effective networking opportunity, it's also a chance to let your hair down and have fun!

We hope that this article has outlined some of the benefits of presenting at an international conference, and highlighted some practical tips that may help in preparing for the event. The last and probably most important pointer we can offer is this: enjoy it! Rather than a daunting burden, presenting at events such as FEPSAC is a terrific opportunity, both academically and socially. First-time presenters who adopt such an attitude are sure to get the most out of their inaugural experience.