

Why Do Poster Presentations Not Receive More Consideration? Some Thoughts Shared by Two PhD Candidates

Dear Editor:

Involved in the publication race at an early stage, PhD candidates' first publications usually are presentations at conferences – especially by poster. There is, nevertheless, a striking paradox when it comes to poster presentations.

On the one hand, they are officially promoted, particularly during the early years of a student's curriculum. For example, since starting our PhD studies, we have been repeatedly advised by professors, program directors and academic supervisors to participate in conferences. An evaluator from a government funding agency explained to us that she high-ranks applicants who present at conferences, especially overseas. Following these recommendations, we respectively presented 5 and 4 posters during the first two years of our PhD. This helped us boost our scientific ratings and obtain doctoral scholarships. But poster presentations are not only strategically useful to one's *Curriculum vitae*; they also improve the ability to synthesize and visually organize preliminary data. Moreover, they provide added value compared to oral presentations, since they allow for more casual and instructive discussions – two qualities beneficial to PhD candidates.

On the other hand, our poster presentations – unlike their oral counterparts – were not eligible for expense reimbursement (registration fees, printing cost, travel expenses, etc.) by the same funding agencies (federal or provincial) that officially promote them. Likewise, conference coordinators seem to give low priority and credit to poster presentations. Yet presenting a poster requires a minimum of space so that the audience can stand back and appreciate its coherency. Similarly, poster sessions require suitable time and place arrangements. Neglecting these elements is unfortunate because it affects the willingness of both the public and the authors to attend; consequently, it reduces the number of scientific discussions, as well as networking opportunities.

Following up on a call to dialogue between researchers and conference organizing committees,¹ here are a few recommendations:

- Set up poster alleys at least 7 to 10 feet wide, even if this means reducing the number of posters;
- Schedule poster sessions at reasonable times and in reasonable places;
- Stop charging registration fees to primary authors of posters – especially those from low- and middle-income countries;
- Take innovative steps to promote posters, such as posting high-quality photos of posters (or recordings of the formal presentation) on the conference website, giving an equal amount of time to oral and poster sessions, etc.;
- Shift the emphasis from quantity to quality of presentations by giving awards for the best presentations and/or promoting their visibility after the conference (e.g., setting up a database of the best presentations).

Shifting the focus to quality would also require the involvement of academics and students. We suggest:

- Organizing “how to present posters” sessions, in addition to the usual “how to write an article” sessions, aimed at both graduate students and those who have just started their PhD studies;
- Encouraging assistance between PhD cohorts in the preparation and revision of posters.

These first steps toward better consideration and quality of posters would, we hope, play a role in increasing their value and improving funding opportunities.

Thomas Druetz, MA (International Studies), DESS in Community Health; Émilie Robert, MA (Political Science), Master in Developing Studies

Département de médecine sociale et préventive, Université de Montréal, Montréal, QC; Centre de Recherche du Centre Hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal, Montréal, QC

REFERENCE

1. Ridde V, Mohindra KS. The value of presenting at scientific conferences: Reflections by a couple of early career researchers. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2009;63(1):3.