What Is the Purpose of the Conference?
by Jeanette Romkema

“We are weary of academic conferences.”

That’s how Christy Wampole starts her article The Conference Manifesto in The New York Times (posted May 4th 2015). Indeed, I can relate to that. In fact, it is getting increasingly challenging for me to go to conferences at all, for fear of experiencing undesired levels of stress and frustration.

Then I read:

“Academic conferences are a habit from the past, embraced by the administrativersity as a way to showcase knowledge and to increase productivity in the form of published conference proceedings. We have been complicit. Until now.... We believe it is time to ask ourselves: What is the purpose of the conference?”

That’s when Wampole’s article really got good. She then continued by offering the following 10 statements for workshop presenters to agree to – a sort of contract to sign. If we can’t change the entire conference planning, at least we can start with the workshops. I love it!

1. I understand that the conference paper should do something that an article cannot. Since it involves direct, real-time contact with other humans, the speaker should make use of this relatively rare and thus precious opportunity to interact meaningfully with other scholars.

2. I will not read my paper line by line in a monotone without looking at the audience. I needn’t necessarily abide by some entertainment imperative, with jokes, anecdotes or flashy slides, but I will strive to maintain a certain compassion toward my captive audience.

3. I understand that a list is not a talk. I will not simply list appearances of a theme in a given corpus.

4. I will have a thesis, and if I don’t, I will at least have a reason that my talk should exist.

5. I will keep direct citations to a minimum, not relying on them to fill up time. I understand that audience members shudder at lengthy blocks of text in the PowerPoint or on the handout.

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6. In the Q. and A., I will not ask an irrelevant question for the sake of being seen asking a question. If my question is hyperspecific and meaningless to anyone but myself, I will approach the speaker after the talk with my query.

7. I will not make a statement and then put a question mark at the end to make it sound like a question.

8. If I ask an actual question, I will a) not take more than a minute or so to ask it, and b) ask it politely even if I disagree with the speaker.

9. I respect the time of my colleagues who’ve come to hear me speak. I will do my best to be as clear and succinct as possible, and make their attendance worthwhile.

10. I understand that if I disregard these recommendations, I might be complicit in the death of the humanities.

Thank you Christy Wampole. Where’s the contract I need to sign – I’m in!

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