

How to Go About *Breaking Boundaries*: Conference Organising Don't-Know-How for Complete Novices

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Well...

How did it all happen? It just did!

At the wine reception after last year's conference the organisers said: "You guys have to make it next year", and we said: '*Yeah, right*', being pretty convinced that it is not going to happen. And yet, we gave it a go, and after lots of confusion, miscoordination, and last-minute running around, it happened. The conference day itself was dynamic and smooth, we had amazing speakers, engaged in spontaneous discussions, and got excellent feedback from participants and guests. However, we would have run into far more difficulties, were it not for the advice from one of the previous year organisers, so we thought that recording some of our impressions in a few brief points might be helpful for next year's team. However, putting a piece of text together proved much harder than organising a conference, so, I guess, this is the right place to insert a disclaimer: this text only reflects my own impressions and views, and is not in any way representative of the other members of the *Breaking Boundaries* team.

On a personal note, *Breaking Boundaries* marked a new level in my love-hate relationship with all things organisational. This is the first time that I am not pledging (as I have done a few times before) that I am never ever going to organise anything again. I probably will, and I will also be just a little bit more organised, the work will be less stressful, and the result—even better. No, I haven't suddenly converted into an organiser-junkie. But the whole thing wasn't half as hard as I had thought it would be, and proved to me that it is possible to make an event happen—and, what is more, to make it happen exactly in the way you want it.

After the Third Annual Conference came true, we can now relax: the foundation of a conference tradition can now be announced. However, now it the stake is even bigger: a fourth edition of the conference needs to take place. We want you to do it!

So—how *exactly* did it all happen?

A Late Start

The previous conference, *Work in Progress*, took place in Dec 2007. It was jokingly named "Annual" and the organisers kept nagging everyone else about the tradition that was about to become established. They had a point, wouldn't it be wonderful to have an annual postgraduate event at Warwick? After all, it is the largest postgraduate sociological community in the whole country. The idea was in the air, but when a couple of us discussed it in May 2008, we realised that it was already too late to start organising an event for December. Had there been a committed little core of interested organisers, it would have been possible—but none of us had had much previous experience, so we didn't get going until the end of the summer. We held our first 'proper' meeting in September 2008.

Conference theme

How do you know when you have come found a good name and theme for the conference? For us it was when we started applying the concept in the theme to all aspects of the organisation and even of our own work. We broke some boundaries by having the organising team at some point physically spread across 6 time zones and 4 countries (three of whose names incidentally began with B).

We were struggling to find a theme but nothing emerged from the discussions until one of us randomly came up with the phrase '*Breaking Boundaries*'—one evening while cooking her dinner. The next day we had a meeting and by that time (during dinner, a good night's sleep, breakfast and a bus ride to campus) the catch phrase had grown into an almost comprehensive vision.

'*Breaking Boundaries*' sounded like a theme large enough to unite postgrads in different disciplines from social studies and humanities. During this first stage of drafting and crafting the concept, a few heated arguments about the concept took place. The next challenge was to write out the project and narrow it down to a meaningful theme. It took us about ten drafts (one of us had a go at the first draft, which then got mercilessly rewritten by everyone else, and the final draft differed substantially from draft 1).

The Team

How many people do you need to organise a postgraduate conference? There is really no universal number.

Our organising team consisted of 7–8 research (M.A. and Ph.D.) students, and one very helpful PhD finalist, one of last year's organisers. The preparation spanned over 6 months, but it was not a particularly dense or regular activity.

Coordinating such a large team meant a lot of manpower, but had its downsides. Organising meetings was almost impossible; the responsibility for some activities was blurred and thus deadlines were missed; agreeing on the vision and on which abstracts to accept was not easy. Also, having people with different workstyles was both a blessing and a curse. Some people did a lot in the early months, while in the end other people came in and did a great job of pulling it all together in the last minute.

However, being in a large team helped keep the activities rolling, even while some of us were abroad for their research. One of us went away for her fieldwork two months prior to the event, and was not even there on the day. Another spent four months away, and was thus mainly engaged with managing the conference webpage and email accounts (thus having to teach herself simple web-design on the go, in the evenings after interviews). A third one was away for a month. There was one month during which the team was spread across four countries, spanning across 6 time zones! That was some boundary breaking, I'm telling you. One organiser ended up leaving the group, for reasons that were never fully explicated, possibly because their ideas seemed to differ from the rest, but also because they were busy organising something else as well. The group dynamics was interesting to observe: the workload was unevenly balanced, but everyone did their crucial bits of work. In the last days before the event it was especially good to have several people involved: while two of us were pushing a trolley to and from Costcutter (to buy tonnes of essentials), another two were preparing the packs, while two had to work full time.

What we did well

- We had brilliant **keynote speakers**. The second thing one has to do after inventing the theme and a date (or, better still at this stage, a vague period of about two weeks), was to draw a list of our 'dream' keynote speakers and discuss it. Then one of us contacted them to see who was and interested and when they were available. Luckily, we had three 'yes'-es, but this doesn't always happen (potential speakers could be busy, or not that interested, or there could be unaffordable expences such as travel, accommodation, etc.), so it is a good idea to be very convincing, but also to have a good back up plan.
- We received great **abstracts** from our candidate-speakers. The overall number or submissions was not that large, which, given the high quality, was a big asset: we could afford to accept most of the

abstracts that we liked. Sadly, however, we did have to reject some good ones, sometimes because we needed to arrange speakers in panels, or because there was an unbalanced number of abstracts in some themes, while we wanted to keep it interdisciplinary. We also found out that extrapolating the quality of a paper from a 250-word abstract is a rather arbitrary decision. We divided the overall number of abstracts among ourselves so that each abstract would be read and assessed by two reviewers. A table was thus created with the names of authors, themes of papers, key points, jury comments, and jury verdict ('yes by all means', 'yes', 'maybe', 'no').

- **The Ideas' Room**—equipped with writing materials and suited for people who wanted to chill out from the talks and discuss their ideas—was a good and innovative—even though it could have worked better, if more people had used it. I think that it was a bit confusing for participants.

What could be done better

- **Assigning clear roles** right at the beginning would have helped: many times nobody took action because they thought they weren't entitled to make a decision.
- We did not appoint a dedicated **financial officer** right from the start. This is probably the most crucial aspect of organisation which we overlooked, not least because none of us felt confident enough to do this kind of job. Having one person only deal with the monies (draft and amend a detailed conference budget, take care of the conference bank account, communicate with the Sociology department accountant and secretaries, collecting payments and issuing receipts on the day) would have saved us a lot of hassle.
- Having a **tighter timeframe** would have helped, too. We did our best to make a time-scheme and follow it, but we kept missing our own internal deadlines, not least due to the inability to organise more than two people meet at the same place and time. In this respect, having a core group plus some extra people towards the end seems like a better way to do it, but again, in our case this wouldn't have worked, as most people weren't available—or even in the country—all of the time.
- The **venue** wasn't perfect. Conference was rather inconveniently located, even though we booked the rooms several months in advance. When booking the rooms, we should have made sure that the room numbers suggested by Warwick Conferences were actually on the same floor or at least close enough. We only discovered this a couple of weeks before the event, and ended up having to put up extensive signage all over the Humanities building. The Wolfson Research Exchange centre in the library was opened after we had already booked our venue, and they even contacted us to suggest that we use their facilities—it would, indeed, make a lovely venue.
- **Publicity** is a key issue. In order to publicise as broadly as we could, one of us prepared a list of UK departments which could be possibly interested in the conference (using the list from last year's conference as a base). As we wanted it to be interdisciplinary, we contacted not only Sociology, but Politics, International relations, Humanities, and Arts departments and schools. An even more comprehensive list would have been better, and in the long run it would be worth creating a good updatable database for conference purposes, based on our and last year's early effort.
- Hurdles emerged over something as trivial as the arrangement of **coffee-breaks**. We thought we could curb the expenses by providing our own coffee break, which could have been possible, if unreasonably difficult, for under 30 attendees. However, in the last week we realised we were going to have to cater for about 45-50. Luckily, Warwick Hospitality were helpful and arranged to add coffee breaks to our food order in the very last moment. We realised that the price of coffee breaks, after all, wasn't that high, compared to the effort on our part—given that we had many other things to do on the day.
- And just a couple of **further ideas**:

- We noticed that the department of History was offering a grant of 400 for events organised in collaboration with other departments—if we were to organise something now, we would research this and suggest collaboration to the historians; it might also be worth suggesting to our Department to organise a similar scheme.
- We were very pleased to find out that some guests have attended all three annual conferences, and it would be great if next year on the 4th conference they could get a special invitation, an attendance waiver or free entry, or an invitation to bring a colleague, etc.

So...?

After all this has been said, you can probably see how much I would like to attend the Fourth Annual Conference 2009-2010 hosted by Warwick Sociology... and that it is so easy that **YOU** can do it!

So, when is it?