

Location:  • Dear ESOF

Dear ESOF

Veena Patwardhan

Tweet 0

1 Comment

0

09th Jul, 2010 at 07:07 pm

Like 1

Dear ESOF,

"It's important to be polite, but it's more important to be honest", said Professor Holger Wormer, one of our mentors at our last feedback briefing before the curtains swung down on ESOF 2010. Sound advice, don't you think? I for one agree with him 100%. Honesty is the best policy, especially when you sincerely want to help make things better.

At ESOF 2010, everything was well organised. The event was well planned, the credentials of the speakers were impeccable, and the sessions were varied, multidisciplinary and all that.

I attended at least three or four sessions each day. With one or two exceptions, my experience was the same every time. I think I'll give you a re-cap of "When scientists read literature", one of the few off-the-track topics, one you wouldn't normally find featured in a science conference. Congratulations for selecting such an intriguingly innovative theme.

They say "we are what we read", and that is why this topic peaked my curiosity. I wondered which literary works had shaped the thinking of scientific greats like Faraday, Owen, Humbolt and Maxwell. What a wonderful treat

 logo_Esof2010

this session will be, I thought as I ticked it on my copy of the sessions program. In the seemingly long line up of heavy-duty scientific talks, here was one that would be refreshingly buoyant, or so I thought.

And so I almost skipped all the way to Sala Parigi in joyful anticipation, joining the hordes streaming into the venue. Smartly turned out, well-fed science journalists, some with their designer jeans fashionably on the verge of slipping down their plump hips, were literally rubbing shoulders with eager young scientists, including a sprinkling of Einstein look-alikes, obviously potential “madly-in-love-with-science” scientists of the future, as they tried to find a seat in the crowded hall. The place was packed with attendees of different hues and nationalities within minutes. Soon people were jostling for space even in the aisles along the length of the hall. The topic was clearly a popular choice. Not surprisingly, an enthusiastic round of applause greeted the organiser as she strode to the dais to open the session.

Did the proceedings that followed enrapture us? Frankly speaking, no. Were we disappointed? YES!

Coming back to the session that's the focus of this letter, we had four speakers that day, each of them eminent professors who had made their mark in European academic circles, but chosen more for their knowledge of the reading preferences of the scientists I named earlier rather than for their eloquence. Agreed, it must be terribly intimidating for speakers to face a bunch of sombre-faced science geeks or smart-ass, smirking journalists. But on the other hand, (don't know if repeating this favourite phrase of mine makes me sound like Topol in Fiddler on the Roof), did they have to strut their stuff in that dreadful monotone? That too, barely looking up from their written notes? To be fair, I have to admit this was a common feature at almost every session I scurried to. At some, the drone of the speakers was accompanied by complex graphics flitting across the screen behind them, disappearing even before we could scan them, leave alone grasp their significance.

Like most ESOF speakers, our four learned professors took care to see they imparted information in the most complex way as possible. The experience was like having water described to us as liquid dihydrogen monoxide. To be honest, the speakers did manage to draw a chuckle or two from us, but surely, given a topic with so much potential, they could surely have done a much better job. A tad more science-centric humour would have given the almost lifeless session a vitalising shot in the arm. And what a let-down it was to see our speakers were not enthused enough about their subject to be able to speak extemporaneously even for a few minutes here and there.

The result? Even before the session was half-way through, people were grabbing their belongings and rushing out of the hall like wild animals fleeing from a forest fire. The formerly jam-packed hall was soon half-empty. Those who didn't have the nerve to stomp off were struggling to stay awake. The few who had been diligently trying to jot down notes at the speed of light (that was how fast the speakers were zipping through their notes), had long since given up doing the

subscribe:

search the euroscientist

Related Posts

[ESOF 2012 Careers Programme](#)

26th Jul, 2011

[Dublin's Science Gallery](#)

19th Jul, 2011

[Euroscience Fiction](#)

17th May, 2011

[Heritage interpretation is management](#)

28th Apr, 2011

[I'm a scientist, not a freaky nerd](#)

15th Apr, 2011

[Measuring the impact of outreach](#)

11th Apr, 2011

[Science = art?](#)

14th Mar, 2011

[Putting the spark in science communication](#)

23rd Jan, 2011

[School children publish science project in peer reviewed academic journal](#)

11th Jan, 2011

[Telling the whole story](#)

16th Dec, 2010

podcasts

[Batty about bats](#) October 14, 2011

[Science is Vital Rally](#) October 11, 2010

[Claire McNulty, British Council](#) October 3, 2010

[Dr Christian Yeomans. UK HE](#)

impossible. Speaker after speaker was letting loose facts the way a trigger-happy soldier fires bullets from a gun. Wouldn't it have been better if they had trained their sights on delivering a crisp and concise talk, making it both informative and stimulating? I think even you would agree it's possible to make people think and smile at the same time, right?

The bottom line? If the distinguished speakers had even passable public speaking skills, it would make your sessions not only livelier but also more productive. You know, I had actually sat in on one session where they talked about making science more fun for kids to induce a greater number of them to choose scientific careers. But how about making ESOF more fun? That's the only way forward if your aim is to be the best science-related outreach program in Europe.

I love science, and I love what you're trying to achieve. And that's the only reason I think I have a right to be frank with you. Politely frank.

Post tags: [Communication](#), [ESOF 2010](#), [Public Engagement](#)

One Response to *Dear ESOF*



Add a comment...

Comment



Srikumar Koyikkal · National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirappalli

Very good comment. If you can make a person think, soon enough, he will smile.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · May 1 at 11:15pm

Facebook social plugin

The views of contributors to the Euroscientist do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Euroscience Governing Board

© 2010-2012 Euroscience.org | Legal Disclaimer