

Attending professional conferences

Edu. Professional

By Mohammad Zafar

IN the world of today and of yesterday societies that grew and progressed always believed in the advantages of conferencing. In the very old times, Aristotle preferred to set up his own school called the Lyceum. He used to discuss philosophical matters such as logic, physics and metaphysics and in the afternoon held lectures/discus-

from around the globe. These conferences provide a wide range of academic activities to all those who attend it or who are present there. Big names in ELT attend this conference because it is their own professional growth as well. They get a chance to interact with diverse views from people coming from different parts of the world. Not only do they teach or

ces in educational context as time passes. These include attending in-house or external short and long courses/workshops, listening to lectures by known speakers, online discussions, blogs, reading journals and books, interacting with seniors, peers and juniors and attending conferences and seminars. Conferences differ from all other forms of professional de-

ated I did not know what a computer was. Now 35 years later, I cannot even prepare my lessons without a computer. The onus of learning lies on the learner if we want to grow professionally.

Presenters, both local and foreign, look at issues from different angles whereas reading a book may give us people's views only. The people who deliberate about these issues are not laymen but those who have made a name for themselves in a particular field of expertise.

Talking to them, discussing issues with them, clears many of our conceptual cobwebs. This in no way means that reading books is obsolete but a small investment of time and money will yield much better results by attending a conference.

We need to carefully look at the themes of the conference, see who the speakers are then judge them against our own area of interest and decide which sessions to attend after that.

We can ask questions and try to see how applicable or practical are the solutions to the problems that we face in our own teaching environment.

We can easily intermingle with those scholarly figures after the sessions and learn a lot even though informal discussions and chats. Conferences provide us with ample opportunity to develop links with people working in the field in different countries. These may result in international projects and researches. It leads to community building in terms of Special Interest Groups which are now easily linked up through emails, blogs, Skype, Orkut, etc., and make use of each others' experiences, knowledge and expertise. Sharing materials, ideas, and innovations are all part of this linkup.

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sions in more popular matters such as rhetoric and politics with people in their field. The concept of kiva also reflects the same tendency of open discussion on matters of importance to a given society.

Debates and discussion on vital educational or linguistic issues may teach us much more than reading a book. Attending conferences can become a very important ingredient of our professional development.

Conferences/seminars these days are held for nearly every discipline and are seen as a means to find collective answers to collective/individual teaching/learning issues. It enables us to think globally and act locally. Some of the major English Language Teaching (ELT) conference around the world is the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) and Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

These two major conferences attract leading linguists, teachers, researchers, administrators, managers, and authors

share their ideas, they also learn a lot from the people there. It is a mutually rewarding experience.

In Pakistan there are not many ELT conferences but Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers (SPELT) and Aga Khan University Centre of English Language (AKUCEL) have their ELT conferences on a regular basis. I have attended conferences in diverse places like Hong Kong, Manila, Al-Ain, Kuala Lumpur, Durham and Kathmandu and found it to be an academically rewarding and enriching experience.

The primary purpose of attending conferences which is a part of professional development is to create a framework that enhances the learning/teaching capacity of students and teachers. We as students or teachers need to continually grow professional and this can only be done by professional development. It provides a variety of learning opportunities to the individual and it entails a constant search for answers to questions which arise from the ever-changing circumstan-

development in a number of ways.

If they want, teachers and students can use these conferences in a very benefiting manner. First of all teachers must realise that the excitement of getting their academic degree with good grades is just the tip of the iceberg in terms or their first step as professionals. It has been universally proved that learning to be a teacher or to teach is a life-long experience. The process of becoming an experienced teacher who is aware of his/her own philosophy of teaching and learning, who can efficiently draw on and adapt content knowledge, and who is capable of making decisions before, during and after every teaching and leaning experience does not take place right after college is over.

The needs of learning and teaching are ever changing and we become redundant if we stick to all that was taught to us in our education/training period. I learnt English because I liked English literature but my son learns English because that will give him a better job. When I gradu-

novations are all part of this linkup.

I personally find conferences as an antidote to teacher burnouts. It at times creates a very good scholarly environment for discussing ideas about a teaching concern with the best in the field. And once back to work, I may carry all the new ideas from the conference, adapt it to my teaching situation and incorporate my new-found knowledge into my teaching context.

Some of the participants attending conferences are of the view that:

- "An investment of Rs1,000 is peanuts compared to the benefits we get."
- "I got more in two days than I may get reading three books in triple the time."
- "Interviewers during job interviews are impressed if you have attended professional conferences."
- "Conferences teach us how fellow teachers in other parts of the world have resolved some of the academic issues that we face."
- "Even if we get nothing, we still have that attendance certificate which can be added to our CV." ■

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