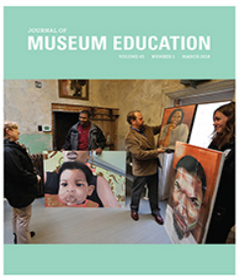

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CONFERENCE REVIEW

The Annual Ecsite Conference: An Engagement and Education Forum for Science Museums

Joseph Roche, Nicola Davis, Jessica Stanley and Mairéad Hurley

ABSTRACT
The annual Ecsite conference is the largest conference in Europe for people working in science museums, science centers and other science engagement organizations. In 2017, the 28th Ecsite conference was held in Porto, Portugal, from the 15th–17th of June. This review includes a short history of Ecsite and its annual conference as well as critical reflections on the 2017 conference from the perspective of museum educators working in the area of science engagement.

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Ecsite annual conference; science museums; science engagement; informal learning; museum educators

Background to the Ecsite network and its annual conference

Ecsite stands for "European Collaborative for Science, Industry and Technology Exhibitions." It was founded as an international non-profit in 1989 by 23 European organizations, with the objective: "to promote public understanding of science and technology by facilitating co-operation inside Europe."[1] The development of the Ecsite network mirrored the formation of the Association of Science-Technology Centers and the first annual conference was held in the science museum, Museon, in The Hague, The Netherlands from the 19th–20th of June, 1990.[2] That first conference was attended by around 100 professionals, but when the conference returned to The Hague for the 25th anniversary conference in 2014 it had more than 1000 participants.[3] While this review focuses on the 2017 conference, a more comprehensive account of the history of Ecsite is available on its website.[4]

The 2017 conference

The 2017 Ecsite conference was held in Porto, Portugal, from the 15th–17th of June. The conference was hosted by the Natural History and Science Museum of the University of Porto and Ciência Viva – the National Agency for Scientific and Technological Culture in Portugal. There were 1058 participants from 52 different countries, 405 speakers and 108 parallel sessions. The theme for the conference was "Life Everywhere." Along with the more obvious connotations of biodiversity, a subtler undertone of this theme was the celebration of human lives around the world.

Rather than trying to provide a comprehensive overview of the whole conference, this review will focus on two key aspects: the main recurring themes that arose during the conference and how the format of the conference itself aided learning and professional development for museum educators. The two keynote speakers were Professor Alice Roberts

(Professor of Public Engagement in Science at the University of Birmingham) and Nina Simon (Executive Director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History). Prof. Roberts spoke about her personal journey "from clinician to communicator" while Ms. Simon discussed her own experiences of working with museums and cultural centers around the world. A common theme of both keynote presentations was the need for improving public engagement. Prof. Roberts emphasized how mutual learning is key for meaningful engagement while Ms. Simon highlighted the power of focusing on relevancy.[5]

The goal of striving for ways to make museums more relevant to different communities was a recurring topic throughout the conference. As well as being raised in both keynote presentations, the value of diverse and inclusive education was a prominent topic for debate in subsequent sessions.[6] While the significance of this subject was unanimously agreed, a persistent follow-up point of discussion was how inclusive education programs are more important now than ever due to the current global political climate.[7] No common agreement was reached on definitive actions, but the importance of seeing museums as safe spaces for the most vulnerable members of society became a fervently debated issue.

The format of the Ecsite conference has some unique characteristics that can benefit learning and professional development for museum educators. Although the speakers and conveners across the sessions are almost always professionals in their fields, there is a balance between researchers and practitioners. This means that museum educators hear about the development of theories and concepts in the field as well as getting to discuss practice. The conference sessions go through a rigorous and competitive review process but there are marked differences with more academic-leaning conferences. Ecsite encourages speakers and conveners to consider new and "edgy" styles of presentations that involve more engagement with audience members. This resulted in the 2017 conference sessions having unusual formats such as: confessions, therapies, pub quizzes, fishbowl discussions, murder mysteries, campfires, photo safaris and learning ecosystems.

The 2017 conference also afforded non-traditional elements like a business bistro (a trade show for professionals and institutions to present new tools, ideas and opportunities), two workshop spaces (a GameLab and a MakerSpace) and specialist pre-conference working groups. Of these, the MakerSpace was the most hands-on and practical addition to the conference. It was a pop-up workshop space that facilitated experimenting, feedback, advice and drop-in discussion. The space itself was put together collaboratively by the conference organizers, local makers, and by conference delegates who run making and tinkering spaces in their own institutions. The resulting space at the conference was an amalgamation of different approaches and styles. It was active for the duration of the conference, which meant conference delegates could return to the space repeatedly over the course of the conference to get advice, feedback and firsthand experience. The MakerSpace also gave attendees an opportunity to devise solutions for some of the challenges that were raised in the main conference. The recurring theme of supporting marginalized communities was explored in the MakerSpace with activities being designed and tested that would be more inclusive for refugees and other groups facing social exclusion. While designing activities for marginalized communities is a noble exercise, the potential of the MakerSpace was limited by the conference attendees themselves – as noted by the keynote speakers the activities can only be effective if they are designed using a co-creation approach involving the actual communities they hope to serve.

Critical reflections for museum educators

Science museums and science centers are pillars of the informal science learning field.[8] Although educators working in science museums and centers have somewhat more freedom than formal learning environments to experiment with new forms of public engagement[9] and pedagogical practices,[10] useful professional development opportunities can be rare.[11] In Europe, the annual Ecsite conference is the largest conference of its kind and consequently represents a unique opportunity to meet other science museum educators in the international field. The experience of learning from well-established professionals and newer members of the museum education community represents a rare chance for professional development. While the unusual session formats of the Ecsite conference can aid learning, a crucial point is that the conference is not an academic conference. This can have a number of repercussions for attendees. Although the basic details of each conference session are stored on the conference website, there are no conference proceedings. For museum educators that are involved in research, choosing a conference that publishes conference proceedings would allow them a valuable route to share their work in a peer-reviewed volume. Although some sessions from the conference might be subsequently highlighted in Ecsite's monthly online magazine, Spokes, the majority of the work presented will not have a legacy outside of the conference. This can have implications for any grant schemes that are used to pay for attendees, as they will often require that funded work be published in conference proceedings.

A barrier that museum educators might face when considering attending the Ecsite conference is the cost. Even though the price of attending international conferences is generally high, the Ecsite conference is expensive. This cost can be especially limiting for those working as freelance or part-time educators. For organizations attending the Ecsite conference the cost means that they must carefully select who can make up their delegation. This can lead to only senior staff attending when junior staff might find the conference even more rewarding. Although the costs are high, there is no disputing that the conference is exceptionally well-run as a result. This was mentioned in the conference opening address by Rosalia Vargas, the President of Ciência Viva, who said of Ecsite: "you are the most sophisticated professionals in the world of science communication … you stand in the front row of the combat for knowledge."

It is hoped that this critique of the Ecsite Conference will aid museum educators in deciding whether or not they should attend future conferences. The most obvious advantage of attending the conference is the unique opportunity for networking and professional development. The novel session formats available and the welcoming nature of the event also make the conference an attractive environment for learning, especially for professionals that are new to the field. Conversely, the high cost of the conference fees may be an obstacle for attendees and the lack of conference proceedings means that there is very little academic acknowledgement of work presented at the conference. Any museum educator that is considering attending would have to weigh up which of these factors are most relevant to them before making their decision. The next conference will be held in Geneva, Switzerland, June 7–9, 2018.

Notes

1. Ecsite, "History of Ecsite."
2. Beetlestone, "The Science Center Movement"; Lipardi, "The Evolution and Worldwide Expansion of Science Centres."
3. The earliest Ecsite meetings are described in the essay "Ecsite: How Did it Start? Some (Good) Memories of the Exciting Early Days" by Coutant.
4. www.ecsite.eu.
5. Both keynote talks are available to watch online in their entirety: https://goo.gl/1uvhTH and https://goo.gl/5k4kFH.
6. Kinsley, "Inclusion in Museums."
7. Roche and Davis, "Should the Science Communication Community Play a Role in Political Activism?"
8. Bell et al., *Learning Science in Informal Environments*; Toon, "Solitude and Reflection in Science Centers."
9. Bunten and Arvizu, "Turning Visitors into Citizens"; Whiteley et al., "'The House' as a Framing Device for Public Engagement in STEM Museums."
10. Tran, "Teaching Science in Museums."
11. Bevan and Xanthoudaki, "Professional Development for Museum Educators."

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