Conference Reports

Reflections from the 2019 ASIS&T Annual Meeting in Melbourne, Australia

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In October 2019, I attended the Annual Meeting of the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T), held in Melbourne, Australia. It was ASIS&T’s third venture outside of the United States and my first time attending their Annual Meeting.

As a first-time attendee and very new to ASIS&T I wasn’t sure what to expect. I wear the hats of an academic librarian and a doctoral researcher. On top of that, I get easily fascinated by many things at once, so it was quite a challenge for me to choose what sessions to attend. Having attended larger, international conferences before (such as IFLA and IAML), I also knew that what I highlighted in the program would not exactly be what I would attend in the end. The before-conference choice is always very ambitious. I filled my schedule in Melbourne with sessions, panels, and events from morning till evening, every day of the conference. As predicted, I didn’t attend exactly what I set for myself. The conference experience was more organic than just following the pre-planned schedule – which sessions I attended was often a result of a conversation with someone I just met at coffee break. I suppose it’s always good to have a plan – just so you can change it.

On the second day I could see the effects of this organic process. That day, I attended the Doctoral Colloquium. The Colloquium was facilitated by Dr Pnina Fichman and Dr Howard Rosenbaum (both from the Indiana University). It was an incredible opportunity, and I thank the organisers for it from the bottom of my heart. The Colloquium was a half-day session where I met other students, heard mentors answer questions from facilitators and students, and, most importantly, received a 1:1 session with a mentor. I was matched with Professor Sandy Hirsh, a person with a wealth of experience and personal warmth. We talked about my research proposal, my struggles with focus (both in a research sense – having changed my topic several times, and in a personal sense – living with the joys of ADHD). As we talked about my research proposal, new angles started emerging. Some aspects that I found curious before now became so fascinating to me that I immediately got swept into this new stream. More precisely, the aspect of librarians’ education. This became a theme for me throughout the whole ASIS&T meeting.

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I never thought much about librarians’ education. I completed a Library and Information Science degree at the University of Wrocław, Poland, and when I moved to Australia, I followed the formal process of degree recognition, after which I was eligible to work as a librarian in the country. For a long time, I actually thought that all I knew as a librarian I learnt ‘on the job’ and the degree didn’t really matter that much. A recent interaction with another librarian highlighted for me that there were quite big differences in what we were taught during our degrees. The subjects I was taught at university were not standard here. Among typical librarian subjects, I also studied Logic, History of Philosophy, History of Book Culture, or Science of Science. I started wondering how much of that experience actually influenced my professional identity.

The ASIS&T meeting was a great place to explore that topic. My interest in librarians’ education was cultivated at a panel Information science education and library and information studies education: Transnational conversations. In particular, my attention was focused on Clara M. Chu’s presentation of key findings from a white paper prepared by IFLA BSLISE group: Building strong LIS education: A call to global and local action. The paper reiterated for me that there are significant differences in LIS education around the world. I can’t wait to see further results of the group’s work – in particular ‘an international resource that identifies local structures’. Such resource will provide an insight into the LIS environment in different countries – especially interesting to me in the light of my newly found interest in education influences on professional identity of librarians.

I had further opportunity to fuel that interest at a panel facilitated by the Special Interest Group for History and Foundations of Information Science (SIG-HFIS). The panel discussion, led by Elliott Hauser, included Tim Gorichanaz, Yazdan Mansourian, Joseph T. Tennis and Hilary Yerbury. The session, titled mildly provocatively (considering the group facilitating it), Does information science need history and foundations?, started with the panellists sharing their thoughts on what having History and Foundations means to information science. In light of my own readings on what it means to be a librarian – a professional – Yazdan Mansourian’s comments on Foundations giving the profession authority were particularly interesting. At the end of the session, Elliott Hauser presented an online portal: Paper Wishlist, ‘a place to discuss, ask for, and point colleagues to great papers’. I encourage everyone to engage with the portal (ASIS&T membership is not required). Attending conferences has taught me that the best projects are results of serendipitous social interactions – and Paper Wishlist could be an extension of these events.

As I mentioned, I didn’t know what to expect at ASIS&T. Very early on, I noted that the meeting has largely an academic focus; practitioners were in minority. For a brief moment, I felt out of place. This changed at the Doctoral Colloquium. I have found my feet, my niche, and I have found my tribe. I finished my ASIS&T Melbourne experience on a high note. The next meeting is in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I don’t know yet if I can be there in person, but I will definitely keep an eye on what’s happening there in October 2020.