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The Ecstasy and the Agony of Academic Conferences - and a Good One Coming Here

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2/5

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The Ecstasy and the Agony of Academic Conferences—and a Good One Coming Here

They can be the very best of times, and they can be the very worst of times. Academic conferences. I don't know what they are like in your discipline, but I suspect they are similar to those that we in English and other literatures attend.

I have had some of my most stimulating and provocative intellectual experiences at conferences, but I have also been bored almost literally to tears. Taken all around, though, attending conferences is one of the very best things I get to do as an academic.

I first presented a paper at a conference when I was in graduate school. That is the norm today, but it was anything but the norm in 1984. Apparently, I was the first PhD student in the history of the University of Rochester English Department to present a paper at a conference. And the U of R was not alone: I was the only grad student at this big conference, at Penn State, celebrating the

centennial of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The other attendees, celebrated Twain scholars that I was citing in my dissertation, were quite amazed that I was merely a grad student. How things have changed, and mostly for the better, with graduate students encouraged to present papers and research at national conferences, and what would astonish those folks back in the 1980s, with *undergraduate* students doing the same. Winthrop is justly proud of its success with graduate and undergraduate research.

I could not have started out at a better conference. The program's focus on Mark Twain and the celebration of his most famous novel brought together an impressive gathering of Twain scholars, and meeting them at that very early point in my career was seminal for me. A number of them have become good friends that I see annually. My paper, "Huck

and the Moral Art of Lying," grew out of my teaching of the novel, when I noticed and was puzzled by the pattern of Huck's lies and the way lying lay at the moral center of the text. A year or so later, a revised and expanded form of that paper became my first published article, which undoubtedly helped me land a tenure-track job. The conference was key to so much.

Another focused Mark Twain conference I attend is the very best of my conferences, and I would stack it up against any conference anywhere. You might not think Elmira, New York would be such an exemplary site, but it is. Mark Twain spent the summers of his most productive writing years in that little upstate New York town, his wife's hometown. His sister-in-law had a house at the top of a big hill overlooking the town, and the Clemens family would pack up every year to spend the summer at Quarry Farm.

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Susan Crane surprised her famous brother-in-law with an octagonal study on an even higher promontory, and in that pretty little building, Mark Twain, amid cigar smoke and wind-strewn manuscripts, wrote the bulk of *Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, along with many other of his works. Every four years, Elmira College hosts a conference that brings together Twain scholars and enthusiasts from around the world (including a number of Twain impersonators—what an experience it is to read a paper to an audience that includes three or four Mark Twains at various stages of his life).

At the second of these conferences, in 1993, the week I joined the Winthrop faculty, I mounted the lectern in the auditorium there and delivered a paper that was the first part of what would become my book, *Mark Twain and Metaphor*. How thrilling it was to read a paper to an audience that included Lou Budd, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Susan Harris, Alan Gribben, Bruce Michelson, and Tom Tenney! (Substitute the giants of your profession for these names and you will understand my feelings.)

In addition to the stimulating paper sessions, the Elmira conference includes tastings of Finger Lakes wines, themed banquets, cocktail receptions, keynote addresses by people like Ken Burns, nightly musical sing-alongs (I always take my mandolin), and, at the end of the conference, a climb up the hill to the site of that octagonal study where we gather in the dark and smoke cigars and sing spirituals and camp songs. I can't imagine any conference topping this one for intellectual content and human connection. At the one eight years ago, I was the person who handed Hal Holbrook a cigar for him to smoke during the closing ritual.

American Literature Association, an annual meeting of author societies and people who teach American literature, convenes just before Labor Day every year. I often have a hard time choosing among sessions on Hemingway, Melville, Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, writers I love, writers whose work I teach. The South Atlantic Modern Language Association, the first week of November, usually in Atlanta, also provides a rich experience, not the

least of which is travel to an amazing Cuban restaurant with my friend Joe Alvarez.

The worst conference I attend regularly is also the largest and most prestigious: the Modern Language Association conference. MLA is the huge mega-conference for people in English and other languages. Perhaps my loathing of it goes back to the 1980s, when I would go as a job applicant—and for several years, an unsuccessful one. The first time I gave a paper at MLA, I was very excited. The big time! But the experience did not match my imagination. I was the last paper of the very last session of the whole conference, and the two people before droned on way past their time slots. When it came time for me, I had six whole minutes to present my twenty-minute paper. So much for the big time. I was the organizer for the Mark Twain Circle papers this year, and I was actually happy when circumstances prevented me from attending. Chicago in January during the polar vortex. No thanks!

At their worst, conferences can seem like punishment. When you go to a bad session filled with bad papers,

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poorly-written, disorganized, jargon-filled, pointless, you can find yourself wishing you were in the dental chair instead. But when you go to a great session, with three interesting, well-written, ground-breaking, thought-provoking papers—well, that is bliss untold. As I said, I trust that my experience in my discipline translates to your experience in yours.

I write about conferences to advertise a conference here: the 1st Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning, February 21 from 2:00-6:00 pm. We at the TLC are finishing up the conference schedule, and what we have are over 30 presenters in 16 sessions that we know will be stimulating and interesting and valuable. I urge you to register for the conference

and join us for what we hope will grow into a regional conference on teaching and learning. Many thanks to the talented colleagues who will make up this inaugural conference. Come join us for the festivities!

Registration is free, at the TLC website.

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

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just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

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- NEW POSTS ON THE RENOVATIONS**
Posted by [Mark Y. Herring](#) on June 22, 2012 at 2:09pm
- CORE VALUES**
Posted by [Mark Y. Herring](#) on June 5, 2012 at 9:41am
- PLAYING TO TYPE**
Posted by [Blaiz C. Harding](#) on May 25, 2012 at 10:22am
- TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING IN THE CLASSROOM**
Posted by [Amanda Hiler](#) on March 15, 2012 at 12:11pm — [LGC](#)
- GONE WITH THE WIND...**
Posted by [Jo Koster](#) on March 6, 2012 at 10:33am — [2 Comments](#)

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NOTES

- DO COLLEGE PROFESSORS WORK HARD ENOUGH?**
Created by [Jo Koster](#) Mar 25, 2012 at 1:34pm. Last updated by [Jo Koster](#)
- WHO OWNS YOUR COURSE?**
Created by [Jo Koster](#) Mar 19, 2012 at 12:07pm. Last updated by [Jo Koster](#)
- STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF TABLETS INCREASES, PREFERENCE FOR GROWING**
Created by [Jo Koster](#) Mar 14, 2012 at 11:24am. Last updated by [Jo Koster](#)

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Thought for The Week

"The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards."

--Anatole France