

1. PREFACE

Every year new groups of students embark upon the project of organising the BOBCATSSS-conference. A manual summing up experiences made by former groups has been missed, and the board of EUCLID has for a long time planned to produce such a manual. Now we are about realising the project. The first three chapters of the manual which we now publish, deals with the challenges of cross-cultural and cross linguistic cooperation, the process of having papers submitted in addition to a brief summary of the concept and history of BOBCATSSS. New chapters dealing with financing and budgeting the conference, marketing and designing the project organisation will follow.

June, 2005

The board of EUCLID

Ragnar Audunson
Chairman

2. BOBCATSSS – A UNIQUE SERIE OF CONFERENCES

BOBCATSSS is a yearly conference in library and information science, attracting students, teachers, researchers and practitioners from all over Europe and also from the US, Asia and Africa. The conference takes place by the end of January every year.

The BOBCATSSS-conferences are unique in at least three respects:

- They are always arranged as a cooperative undertaking between one LIS-school from Western Europe and one from Eastern/Central Europe.
- It attracts students, teachers and researchers and also practitioners from the LIS-field. It is, thus, a European meeting-place between the professionals of tomorrow and today's researchers and teachers.
- It is a scientific conference with research-based and reviewed papers organized by students as an educational project, in cooperation with and under the tutoring of teachers.

Every year approximately 300 participants from more than 25 countries gather at the BOBCATSSS conference.

It is a complex project and the students organizing it face challenges and have to solve problems related to issues such as

- Marketing
- Financing
- Logistics
- Professional issues such as selecting a relevant and interesting topic, formulating a call for papers, reviewing and selecting papers to be presented among those submitted
- Publish the proceedings
- Presenting speakers and moderating discussions during the sessions of the conference
- Cross cultural communication etc.

The students are responsible for every aspect of arranging the conference. The BOBCATSSS-idea can trace its roots back to 1993. The initiating institution was Hogeschool van Amsterdam and the person without whom this idea would never have been realised, is dr. Ruud A. C. Bruyns.

The first all-European BOBCATSSS-event took place in 1994, also in Budapest. At the closing of that conference, a letter of intent was signed between the LIS-schools of Budapest, Oslo, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Tampere, Sheffield, Stuttgart and Szombathelyi, therefore the acronym. The schools signing the letter of intent committed themselves to continue the cooperation which Hogeschool van Amsterdam together with Hungarian colleagues initiated in 1993 and 1994.

Till 1999 the home of BOBCATSSS was the National Széchényi Library in Budapest, and Hogeschool van Amsterdam had the main responsibility for arranging the event till 1997. Since 1997, BOBCATSSS has been a project under the auspices of EUCLID, the European organization for educational and research institutions in LIS, and the responsibility has rotated among the EUCLID-members. The first one to take over was the Royal School of Library and Information Science in Denmark together with Hungarian colleagues in 1998. Also that year the event took place in Budapest. In 1999, however, BOBCATSSS moved out of Hungary and Budapest for the first time. LIS-students from Fachhochschule Stuttgart and from the University of Bratislava were responsible arranging the conference in Bratislava and Slovakia.

2000: Krakow, Poland. Jagellonian University, Krakow and Royal School of Library and Information Science, Copenhagen

2001: Vilnius. University of Vilnius, Oslo University College.

2002: Portoroz, Slovenia. University of Ljubljana and Fachhochschule Stuttgart

2003: Torun, Poland. Nikolas Kopernikus University and Hogeschol van Amsterdam

2004: Riga, Latvia. University of Latvia and Borås University College, Sweden

2005: Budapest, Hungary. Eötvös Lorand University and Oslo University College

In 2006 Tallin, Estonia will host the conference. The topics of the conferences have been varied. In 1994 the BOBCATSSS participants discussed the future of librarianship. After that one has dealt with topics such as:

- Marketing and development of new information products and services in Europe. (1995).
- Quality of information services. (1996).
- The new book economy. (1997).
- Shaping the knowledge society (1998).
- Learning society, learning organisation and lifelong learning. (1999).
- Access 2000 – intellectual property versus the right to knowledge.
- Knowledge, information and democracy in the open society: The role of the library and information sector. (2001).
- Human being and information specialists: Future skills, qualifications positioning. (2002).
- Information policy and the European Union. (2003).
- Library and information in multicultural societies. (2004).
- Librarianship in the information age. (2005).

BOBCATSSS is a concept which probably is unique to library and information science. In this manual we will sum up some experiences and pieces of advice which might be of use for future organizers.

3. CO-OPERATING ACROSS LINGUISTIC and NATIONAL DIFFERENCES: The MAIN-CHALLENGES and WAYS to OVERCOME THEM

This chapter introduces to understanding of culture and defines some possible dimensions of differences, gives hints and guidelines for better intercultural communication and cooperation in the bilateral team.

Cultures and People Differ

Indeed all people are different, they have different form of face and nose, color of eyes, hairs and skin, different heights, and they have different accents and communication styles. This diversity is visible at a glance, however only over time communicating with people or living in diverse environment we are able to notice and recognize some other distinct features like values, attitudes, beliefs and skills. Major part of invisible differences is attributed to culture. Culture is learned set of mind that influences way of life, behavior and reactions to the world. An influential researcher of cultures Geert Hofstede defines it as *a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group or category of people from another*. He structured complexity of the culture as follows:

- The national level;
- The regional, ethnic, religious, and linguistic level;
- The gender level;
- The generation level;
- The social class level; and
- The corporate (organisational) level (Hofstede cited in Evans and Ward, 2003) .

Our values, beliefs and attitudes are invisible; they are reflected in our behaviors and communication. Researchers explain cultural differences employing one or another typology or dimensions of culture. For instance Hofstede applies 5 dimensions for describing differences in cultures: *power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, and long-term vs. short-term orientation*. There are more approaches for example Parsons and Shils propose multidimensional classification of 5 pairs of alternative variables: *affectivity vs. neutrality, self-orientation vs. collectivity-orientation, and universalism vs. particularism, ascription vs. achievement, specificity vs. diffuseness*. For details of cultural differences you can consult cross- and inter-cultural studies such as *Cultures and organizations: software of the mind* by Geert Hofstede (1997) or some communication manuals for international businessmen like ones by Richard D. Lewis. But be aware that most of such studies are not cultural neutral, i.e. they are representation of certain set of values like Western European or U.S.

It is difficult to change culturally programmed system of values and attitudes, but isn't absolutely impossible. Depending on experience and interaction with different cultures our tolerance and acceptance of differences may change positively or negatively. So use the BOBCATSSS project as a chance to develop relationships and experience another culture, and gain skills of intercultural communication.

Some Hints on Intercultural Cooperation

Communication indeed is the most effective mean to deal with diversity issues and cultural differences. However as Maurice Line puts it communication is never as good as you think, so miscommunication tends to be a major source of intercultural conflict and discomfort in diverse teams and communities. So what to do?

First of all study the other cultures, become aware of similarities and differences of culture you are interacting with. Avoid mechanical application of theoretical knowledge on cultural differences in real life as assumptions and judgments about the people, especially culturally different from you, may turn to be false and consequently you be offensive. There are differences within the culture, so treat a person as individual not as representative of whole group of his or hers culture. Do not rely only on the local media as they may be biased or concentrate on

sensation rather than reality. Invest some time to reading about the partners' country history, political system, art and literature. Share your knowledge with the whole local group. You may also ask supervisor or coordinator of your group to share his / her experience of various cultures, invite an expert, someone who visited the country and knows the culture of your partners. This will allow you to avoid some tricky situations, e.g. questions like do you have computers in Lithuania?

Further step towards successful cooperation is to *recognize* that your way of thinking and behaving is *not necessary* the *right* or *only* one. Living in certain locality and society we have learned that we can achieve success and popularity following certain set of rules and routs. So we usually interpret others and assess their behavior through lenses of our culture, on the basis of what is normal in our culture. And it is not surprising that in very heart we define ourselves positively – intelligent, good or at least normal, and we stick less positive labels and stereotypes to others, i.e. rigid Germans, slow Estonians, arrogant Frenchman, noisy Spanish, etc. When describing groups unfamiliar to us we appeal to stereotypical thinking. It allows us to simplify the reality, so the world becomes more predictable and easier to understand. But coupled with negative judgments of otherness stereotypes turns into prejudices and furthermore causes discriminative behavior.

In bilateral team as BOBCATSSS organizing group always is, it is important to respect differences and avoid *ethnocentrism* – tendency to think of characteristics, values, and behaviors of one group superior to others. Ethnocentric thinking may lead to open or unexpressed confrontation and exclusivity of responsibilities in organization rather than achieving truly multicultural co-operation, which emphasize of diverse cultural representation, and equal power and influence distribution. Ethnocentrism is easier to recognize in others behavior than in our own. So, you have to try talking with others as equal and avoid patronizing. Being flexible you also need to demonstrate sensitivity to different value systems applied to gender, faith and heroes of certain culture. Sensitivity occurs with understanding what other person actually believes and value, so allow others to express themselves. It is true that humor relaxes and creates common ground though sometimes if addressing sensitive faith issues or national heroes it may be the reason for conflict and offence. For example, in one international students' summer seminar sarcastic reference to the Pope by Dutch students seriously offended some Polish students, and hindered development of friendly relationships during the whole seminar.

Communication Planning is Important

Individual written, verbal and nonverbal communication skills are also very important for effective teamworking. However as a group you may find it useful to discuss and agree on common communication strategy. In an organizing team there is no mere speakers and audience, both country teams are or shall be interested in participation in the discussion, dialogue, rather than merely listening of the speech. Dialogue means being sure that taken decision is right, best one out of many alternatives available. In the first meeting and interactions create a list of all members of group with names and important contact data – e-mail, home or school addresses, telephones, etc. It is important to make it clear responsibility of everyone to inform certain person whenever something changes. You can draw matrix of your communication listing audience vertically and types messages and/or documentation horizontally. Communication planning takes time but it pays itself during the project.

Clear communication principles and rules gives consistency and structure to the group co-operation and let us avoid dangers of under-communication and over-communication. Under-communication is a source of stress in the international projects when time is coming to the deadlines and partners are not sharing information on the status and progress of their part of work. Information overload is very common problem with electronic communication and this form of communication usually is the main mean for work and co-ordination in BOBCATSSS team. Overflow may lead to time and energy waste for information processing and therefore delays in reaction or important information loss. Borrow some good rules from the netiquette for e-mails.

Communication strategy fixed on paper provides guidelines to everyone and usually defines:

- **Who** is responsible for communicating (everybody or group and sub-group leaders),
- **With** whom specific information and decisions is needed to be shared (to whole team or just contact persons, or supervisors),
- **What** content should be communicated and to whom (who shall get details on programme matters, to whom question regarding accommodation should be addressed),
- **How** content should be communicated; what detail and what medium is appropriate (consider making a template for memos, reports or minutes),
- **Why** it is communicated: to inform, to persuade, to publicize, to resolve the problem, to discuss, instruct or report (state the purpose explicit in written and oral communication, make a reference to earlier contacts),
- **When, how often** should be communicated (e.g you may agree to exchange reports once a month or fix that in e-mail communication feedback, stating that message reached the address and will be attended, is necessary) ,

In the case of direct meetings **where** communication will take place is also important. Apply this framework to test your written and spoken messages as the failure in any of factors may cause miscommunication and lose of important information.

Meetings are Efficient

Meetings are considered the most efficient way of communication because of richness of the context and possibility of an instant feedback. In international projects this mode of communication is limited due to distance and costs, nevertheless plan at least some meetings during the preparation work of the symposium. It is impossible to indicate exact number of the meetings, as their necessity will strongly depend on the work structure and procedures agreed by the team and by the general atmosphere in your team. In some international projects there are kick-off meetings, starting the project and closure meeting ending the project, in the case of long-term projects partner country co-ordinators may meet once a year to discuss the interim results and to plan the work for the next period. Norwegian – Lithuanian team, organizers of Bobcats 2001, for instance, met three times before the event in Vilnius: in previous symposium, once in Vilnius for the final decision on facilities and accommodation, and in Oslo for coordinated selection of submitted papers and workshops. In all mentioned cases only selected representatives of both groups took part in those meetings. The whole team met in Vilnius a week or so before the event in order for the last preparation load and final decision on coordinated actions during the event. Direct meetings and face-to-face communication contributes a lot to mutual understanding and team integrity, so do plan time for informal communication and activities. Observing, talking and doing something together you will learn much about culturally programmed behaviors and reasons.

Language is Ambiguous

Language is another important issue in success in the bilateral or international team communication. It is not neutral; thinking of a person is influence by the words and structure of a certain language. By nature *language is ambiguous*. It is important to understand that communication – verbal, written, and nonverbal – goes beyond the words said or written. In communication process both sender and the receiver are equally responsible for the understanding. Try to use simple sentences and easy vocabulary. Read carefully what you wrote and if possible use peer-review who knows English in order to produce readable message. Avoid mechanical translation, as words, meaning, and structure of language differs. Note that the tone and how something is said is as important as what is said. Due to expectations of misunderstanding communication in a team with different mother tongues may seem easier to some extent but this does not mean it may go without efforts. In the communication strategy include the statement of language that is used in the project – both for oral and for written communication. In your case this will usually be English, but groups may agree to keep some work documents like minutes of the local meetings or negotiations with the suppliers in their mother tongues, translating only important documents.

Listening Helps

Listening is a key factor to successful communication and team co-operation. It requires concentration and efforts and is more difficult than usually is assumed. Be aware of filtering process – recipient of the message unconsciously may omit certain part of the message, emphasize or add something to what was heard relying on his or her experience and knowledge. So the message meaning perceived by receiver may significantly differ from the original version. If there will no be feedback or questions both sides may leave with the fault impression that they have reached an agreement and common understanding. At the work situations attentive listening is a must, especially in multicultural setting. You have to concentrate on what is said rather than on how it is expressed in words or visual aids. Do not create barriers out of assumptions and preconceptions (I know everything about it, it does not concern me, topic is not important) before the speaker even finished his or her message. Avoid drawing conclusions or expressing disagreement before the speaker will finish. Try to keep your ears and mind open and reflect on what is being said, focus on the words. Do not hesitate asking for clarification of the word, phrase or main idea of the message. There is nothing wrong to repeat your question if the speaker did not understand it. If you are in a speaker's position do not take a question as an offence or sign of doubt of your professionalism. Facilitate asking questions; be friendly. Do know that not always absence of feedback means you were understood, there may be other reasons fear to ask stupid question or fear for their English language skills and accent, etc.

Positive Conflicts

Conflicts are natural thing in a group interaction and shall not be avoided. If constructively dealt, conflicts foster creativity and better understanding. So conflicts may play positive role in group dynamics, but you shall remember some principles of good practice. In the conflict situation show willingness to hear and listen to the other person's or side point of view. If possible avoid being emotional and defensive. Try to rephrase the other side concerns for better understanding and be honest, and friendly. If you made a mistake go further to recognize it and apologize. Negotiation will be essential in your project work, use negotiation as wining technique, not as competition or confrontation. Most appropriate to your negotiation may be principled or problem solving approach:

- Focus on the problem, not the person (group) involved,
- Look for alternatives, rather than fixing on one best way,
- Avoid positioning look for solution,
- Seek common understanding and constructive dialogue.

In the critical situations ask your supervisor for mediation and assistance. It is better to resolve conflicts for you are bound to the common task.

Concluding Remarks

Team working becomes an increasingly common way of working whether in permanent group in formal organization or temporary in less formally held project. Working in team requires cooperation, as everyone is dependent on activities of the other in order to achieve the common goal. But there is much more difficult aspect in teamwork, as a rule, members of a team develop sensibility and interest in interaction and relationships issues. Building a team and developing effective cooperation strategies in a group takes time and efforts and is no way easy to realize. So take your time and practice to learn and recognize cultural differences, analyze group capabilities so that they can become advantages in your preparation work and during the conference. Remember project requires two-way communication and feedback is what really matters. Seek of integration of internal and external communication either within national groups, in the whole team. Don't forget to apply your improved abilities of communication and intercultural knowledge addressing external groups of interest – potential and registered participants, sponsors, and media. If during the symposium and after it you are able and want to communicate within your group and with others, it means you had a successful partnership. If not, look for the problems and dig reasons, rarely only one side could be blamed. Don't fail to learn the lesson for the future.

4. GETTING PAPERS SUBMITTED

This section gives advice on how to ask for submission of papers and other forms of presentation.

The call for participation

The 'call for participation' should be put on the web at an early stage, and at the latest by the September before the conference. If it is later, people will not have sufficient time to plan to participate.

If you are intending to invite speakers, e.g. for plenary or introductory presentations, they should be invited as early as possible, and certainly well before the general call for participants.

The initial publicity material for the conference - given out at the conference the year before - will have stated its main themes. The web pages should repeat these, and give more detail of sub-topics, and examples of topics, within the themes.

- State clearly whether these are the only topics which are acceptable, or whether you will consider other topics within the general theme.

Say what forms of participation are invited, e.g. presentation of a paper, workshop, poster.

Explain anything necessary about the forms of participation, e.g. time allowed for presentation, or what the format of a workshop should be.

Specifying how Submissions Should be Made

Decide how you will accept submissions - e.g. by web form, by email attachment, in the paper post - and state this clearly.

- State fully and clearly what information you need from those proposing a presentation.

At the minimum this should include:

Name/s of proposers
Their institution, address and contact details
The form of submission - paper, poster ...
Title and abstract

- It will make it much easier to select papers, and to remove those who are unprepared or not serious about attending, if more information than this minimum is required.

It is worthwhile asking for a structured abstract, with sections for:

Purpose of paper
Background, showing the context and existing literature
Methods used for the study
Main findings
Importance and interest of the study
This ensures that the proposers have given sufficient thought to what they are suggesting.

It may also be good to ask for an indication of which proposers are students and which are professors. You can ask for approval by a professor, if all the presenters are students.

Finally you can ask if they will agree to another form of presentation, e.g. to give a poster if there is no space in the programme for a paper.

Although this extra detail makes it more time-consuming to make a submission, it will be helpful in selecting the good ones, and ensuring that the chosen papers are actually given.

Deadline for Submission

This should be stated clearly. If you have to change it for any reason, then do so, again stating the revised date clearly. Never say anything like 'as soon as possible': always give an exact date.

Set this date sufficiently early to give enough time for reviewing all the papers thoroughly.

Almost always, some people will miss the deadline by a few days. You may want to wait a week or so to allow for this, before you start to review what you have.

You should expect some people to contact you to say they have missed the deadline, and ask if they can they still submit a paper. You do not have to agree to this. If you do agree, give them a clear date by which to send their submission. If they do not do so, you should not give them any further chance.

If you have a disappointing number of submissions by the deadline, you may want to extend the deadline date. Do not extend it by too long, not more than four weeks at the most, and do not extend it more than once. Publicise the extension prominently on your web-pages.

This advice may sound harsh. But as a general rule, those people who are going to turn up and give a good presentation will submit their proposal on time. Delaying too long, or too many times, will cause problems for your schedule, without gaining many good papers.

Reviewing and Selecting Papers

This section gives advice on choosing papers for the programme, and for dealing with those which are not accepted.

Initial Screening

It is a good idea for someone to examine each submission as it comes in. Those which are incomplete, or in a wrong format, should be returned immediately, with a request that they be submitted correctly. If the proposers cannot, or will not, do so, then it is unlikely that they will give a good presentation, and their submission should be rejected.

Screening After the Deadline

When the deadline date for submission, and any extension, has passed, the set of proposals received can be evaluated.

Initially, any which are clearly inadequate should be rejected. Criteria for rejection would be:

- Not in a proper format, after a reminder
- Incomplete or not understandable
- Not relevant to the theme and topics
- Too short or uninteresting or 'obvious'

Those which remain can be considered for inclusion in the programme. Ideally, they would all be included, but this may not be possible if there are many more remaining submissions than available slots in the programme. If this is the case, they must be selected on the basis of the selection criteria.

Selection Criteria

There are two main criteria to be considered: the quality of the papers; and the balance of the programme.

The first is more important. You want to select the best papers, on grounds of interest, originality, scope of the study, and the quality of the presentation. All these have to be judged from the submitted abstract.

You may be able to select a few very high quality papers on these grounds. These, together with any invited speakers, form the core of the programme. You add to these a selection of other papers to give a well balanced programme.

The programme should be 'balanced' in two ways: by topic; and by presenters.

You should try not to have too many papers on one of your topics or themes, but try to get a fairly even 'spread' over topics.

Similarly, you should not have too many papers from one university or country. You may want to think about trying to ensure that there is at least one paper from each country or institution which have submitted something that has passed the initial screening. Or you may want to put a limit of the number of papers from any one country or institution.

You should try to get a balance also between papers by students and papers by professors.

Creating a balance in this way means that you may be rejecting good submissions, and this needs to be handled sensitively.

Accepting Submissions

Tell the proposers as soon as possible that their submission is accepted. Give them a clear deadline for anything they still have to do, e.g. give a full paper for the proceedings. Remind them of the need for registration etc., and send any information needed for their presentation, e.g. about the computer and projection facilities.

- Ask them to let you know if they find they are unable to give their paper, so that you can change the programme as soon as possible.

Rejecting Submissions

Try to give a reason for this, but do not get into debate about it. It is your decision. If you have been careful about your quality criteria, and have got a good balance between institutions and countries, then no-one should feel aggrieved, and there can be no grounds for anyone to object to your decision.

If possible, give an alternative. For example, if there is no room in the programme for a paper to be presented, could the alternative of a poster session be offered?