Thoughts on the Science Online London Conference

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We did it. Yesterday was Science Online London, a conference about the online communication of science that took place at the Royal Institution. I hope that everybody that attended had a great time. You can see a lot of conference coverage at Twitter (hashtag #solo09) and in the FriendFeed Science Online London group. And don't forget the Flick group with pictures such as this one by Jacqueline Spoetnik:

Several blog posts have already been written, most notably by Allyson Lister who posted their detailed reports on her the mind wobbles blog literally minutes after the sessions had ended. Nico Adams has also already posted blog posts about a number of session on his blog Staudinger's Semantic Molecules.

London Pub and Science Tour (Matt Brown)
* Science Online London 2009! – The Prequel (Staudinger's Semantic Molecules)
* Science Online London: The Beer and Stuff (Nature Network London Blog)

FringeFrivolous Preconference Event (Jenny Rohn)
* Galaxy Zoo at Mendeley (petermr's blog)
* Fringe Frivolous and Science Online 2009 Pictures (Mendeley Blog)
* It's a control thing, dummy (Science behind the scenes)
* LOLcats and labrats (Expression Patterns)
* In which I rest on my laurels (Mind the Gap)
* On the roof (The Scientist)

Legal and Ethical Aspects of Science Blogging (Petra Boynton, David Allen Green ("Jack of Kent"))
* Among the science bloggers (Jack of Kent)

Blogging for impact (Dave Munger, Daniel MacArthur)
* Blogging for Impact (the mind wobbles)
* Science In the Open 2009 London: Blogging for Impact (Staudinger's Semantic Molecules)
* Present at the Future (Seed Magazine)

What is a scientific paper? (Lee-Ann Coleman, Katharine Barnes, Enrico Balli,

Theo Bloom)
* Breakout 1: What is a scientific paper? (the mind wobbles)
* Notes from Science Online: What is a Scientific Paper? (Staudinger's Semantic Molecules)
* The Future of the Paper. . . Does it have one? (Science in the Open)
* What is a scientific paper? (Sciencebase)
* What is the scientific paper? 1: Observations (Cotch.net)

Breakout 2: Online communication of science by institutions and organizations (Ed Yong, Henry Scowcroft, Paolo Viscardi, Simon Frantz)
* Notes from Science Online 2009: How the Web enables anyone to be a Scientist (Staudinger's Semantic Molecules)

Cat herding: The challenges and rewards of managing online scientific communities (Arikia Millikan, Corie Lok, Ijad Madisch)
* Cat herding: the challenges and rewards of managing online science communities (the mind wobbles)
* Notes From Science Online â€" Cat Herding (Staudinger's Semantic Molecules)

Breakout 3: Author identity: Creating a new kind of reputation online (Duncan Hull, Geoffrey Bilder, Michael Habib, Reynold Guida)
* Breakout 3: author identity – creating a new kind of reputation online (the mind wobbles)

Breakout 4: Citizen science: How the web enables anyone to be a scientist (Arfon Smith, Mike Peel)

Real-time statistics in science (Victor Henning, Richard Grant, Virginia Barbour)
* Real-time statistics in science (the mind wobbles)
* Notes from Science Online â€" Real time statistics and new impact metrics in science (Staudinger's Semantic Molecules)

Google Wave: Just another ripple or science communication tsunami? (Cameron Neylon, Chris Thorpe, Ian Mulvany)
* Google Wave: just another ripple or science communication tsunami (the mind wobbles)
* Reflecting on a Wave: The demo at Science Online London 2009 (Science in the Open)
* Riding a Wave of Science (Nascent)
* Surfing the Google Wave (Highly Allochtonous)

Far out: Speculations on science communication 50 years from now (John Gilbey)
* Far out: speculation on science communication 50 years from now (the mind wobbles)
* Notes on Science Online – Science Communication 50 years from now (Staudinger's Semantic Molecules)

General Posts
* Science Online London 2009 (Endless Possibilities)

* Science Online London 2009 (Colin's Beauty Pages)
* Coffee Break (Expression Pattern)
* Science Online – Aftermath (The Ethical Palaeontologist)
* Science Online, London '09 (Cotch.net)
* Science Online – the London Editionthelondon_ed.php (Highly Allochthonous)
* Science Schmooz-a-thon (Carmen Gets Around)
* Online science communication – a comparison (Endless Possibilities)
* Science Online London 2009 (Exercise in Irrelevance)
* Science Online London 2009 compared to 2008 (eCAT community)
* Science Online London 09: Thoughts, not Transcript (the mind boggles)
* I bet you think this blog is about you, donâ€™t you? (O'Really?)
* What a difference a year makes (Reciprocal space)
* Idle vacation thoughts on Science Online London 2009 (A Developing Passion)
* The Back Channels of the Science Online 2009 Conference (UK Web Focus)
* Unpacking Solo09 (Science of the Invisible)

As one of the conference organizers I'm obviously biased as to how to judge the success of the conference. But I think that organizing a conference about the online communication of science is as much about how to do things, as it is about finding the right session topics. And as Science Online London is only in its second year (and the sister ScienceOnline in North Carolina in its third year), there are still a lot of things we can do better.

What I liked

No parallel sessions
Although we did have two slots with two parallel sessions each, all the other sessions were in the Faraday Theatre. I find that I always miss some great sessions in conferences with many parallel sessions. More importantly this format makes sure that everybody went to the same conference and discusses the same things. I like this because it builds a sense of community around the conference.

No unconference sessions
Deciding on the session topics and speakers at the beginning of the conference is a concept that worked well for similar events in the past (e.g. SciBarCamp Palo Alto, and in part Science Blogging London 2008). We decided to not use this format, which not only made the day of the conference much less stressful for the organizers, but also allowed us to have invite some interesting speakers that otherwise might not have come. This format also made it easier to have different topics and speakers from last year's conference (only 3 out of the 29 speakers also spoke last year).

Live streaming of audio and video
We did stream audio and video of almost all sessions to Second Life. Exceptions were the session on legal and ethical aspects of blogging (which we decided not to record because of the risk that some statements could be taken as legal advice), and the breakout sessions (where we could only record audio). One speaker

(Dave Munger) even gave his presentation through Second Life.

Because the Second Life users could give feedback through Second Life, Twitter or FriendFeed, this was really a virtual conference. Live video streaming (using Second Life or other technologies) should really become the norm for this kind of conference.

A perfect location
The Royal Institution was really a perfect place for the conference. You could argue about the pink color of the seats, but the Faraday Theatre has just the right size and a great of history of communicating science.

What I didn't like

Not enough time in the sessions
We decided to go with 45 minute long sessions, and this turned out to be too short. I would have liked to have a 30 minute discussion in most sessions (some sessions worked well with shorter discussion time, e.g. Legal and Ethical Aspects of Science Blogging). Although there will always be session that require a different format, next time I would force speakers to limit their introduction to 15 minutes. And I would try to make the sessions 60 minutes long.

Not enough time between sessions
The best part of a conference is often the discussions we have between sessions. For this we should have scheduled more time, e.g. by making the coffee breaks 45 minutes long and by having a conference dinner at the beginning of the conference. But the social events on Thursday and Friday and the FringeFrivolous unconference on Friday were not only interesting events, but also great for networking. Doing a conference on a single day is just too short and I would make a repeat conference a two day event. With more time I would also really like to do a brief introduction of every participant (Ã la SciFoo).

Do more moderation
Conferences have a tendency of always having the same people saying the same things. And discussions are sometimes more about people saying something that is dear to their heart rather than asking a question or trying to understand the other side. More moderation could help here to make the discussions more unexpected and productive.

That iPhone that just didn't stop ringing
Unfortunately I just couldn't pay full attention to the last part of the discussion about real-time statistics. Despite many pleas on Twitter, that iPhone must have ben ringing for at least 5 minutes.

This blog will go on summer vacation between August 27-September 20. The author will be in the Southwestern United States and hopes to have little or no internet coverage. During that time fellow German science blogger Alexander Knoll will write a few guest posts from the Annual Conference of the German Gesellschaft *for* Genet*ics* September 16-19.

Update 08/26/09: included more blog posts about Science Online London