ISAHP2020: Lessons Learned and the Future of Conferences

More than 128 participants from 30 countries attended the 16th ISAHP meeting of the International Symposium of the AHP (ISAHP2020) that took place for the first time in cyberspace rather than in a physical place. Most academic conferences have moved to virtual formats with mixed success; however, for the most part the attitude has been that of "it would be worse not to have it" rather than "what a great opportunity." I must confess that my initial reaction was that a virtual ISAHP would not be the "real" conference that we are all accustomed to, so for most of the year I had resigned myself to the idea of not having our biannual meeting this year.

However, the proliferation of virtual meetings this year, and my teammate's enthusiasm, moved me to think, by August, that we should give it a try, although I must confess I was still somewhat skeptical. My doubts did not come from the technical feasibility, although the timeframe was challenging, but in terms of conference success. What do I mean by conference success? Many metrics have been created for this purpose with indicators ranging in number from a few to 20 or more. These indicators cover all sorts of conference aspects such as overall satisfaction, content assessment, networking opportunities, perceived value for the money and others.

For the *IJAHP* team who are also the ISAHP conference organizers, however, our measure of success is simply the satisfaction of our AHP/ANP community in terms of academic content and social networking. I qualify the networking aspect, which usually refers to establishing and maintaining professional contacts, with the additional word "social" because our community values the friendships and social aspect as much as the professional one. Since they began in 1988, our ISAHP meetings have traditionally resembled extended family gatherings. Personally, my concern was that after such a rough year of virtual work and pandemic stress, there would be little interest and energy and perhaps not enough research material available to submit for a conference announced only four months in advance. True, this timeframe was also challenging from an organizational point of view, but even if everything was done on time, I feared that the conference would still be a failure without community participation. But, I am glad we decided to do it! The response was far more enthusiastic than anticipated and the level of participation, in terms of submissions and attendees, was similar or perhaps even greater than several of our previous meetings. Our organizing team, which is recognized individually in another section of this issue, rose to the occasion and had a professional online meeting ready on time. However, what is more important is that our AHP/ANP colleagues and friends also responded enthusiastically by collaborating as track chairs and reviewers as well as by participating in the event.

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What have we learned from the experience? Let's start with the pros. First, in virtual presentations all members of the audience have a good view and audio of each presentation since it is shown on their own computer screen (naturally, a technical issue may occur, but fortunately these were limited to only a few incidents during the symposium). Second, while the responsibility of the academic content lies with the academic committee composed of the program and track chairs, one important advantage is that the sessions are recorded and can be viewed over and over again as needed. This is particularly useful for conferences —like our event—in which there are parallel sessions. By having the sessions recorded, we can re-visit each and every presentation and virtually attend every session that took place at ISAHP2020 for years to come. I found this particularly useful as I reviewed the workshops and plenary sessions to write about sessions of particular interest. Finally, the most important benefit we found is that participants can be part of the event no matter how far apart they are (there is no "here" or "there" in cyberspace). Because of this, attendees that would not normally have participated due to time, distance and financial issues (not everybody can afford the time and money to go to Kuala Lumpur or Hong Kong) can now do so. This was an opportunity we identified early on and for this reason the conference theme was "AHP/ANP: The Next Generation." We saw the ISAHP2020 virtual format as a way to integrate first-timers and young attendees that would not have otherwise participated. We believe we had partial success on this front.

There are also some cons to a virtual format meeting. First, the social presence is very weak. Social presence has been identified as a key factor in the success of virtual instruction, and it can be loosely defined as the extent to which the participant feels part of a social circle. Clicking links and watching presentations can be devoid of social presence (as I have experienced in the extreme at some conferences where the presentations were pre-recorded). At ISAHP2020, the zoom meeting format for each of the sessions allowed the participants to browse, see who else was in the session, and who was not, and exchange warm greetings via the chat. We do however feel that we fell short in providing spaces for social interaction during our conference. Second, time differences do offer challenges for the participants. Having the conference run from 8 am – 2 pm US Eastern Time meant that the European attendees would be attending from 2pm – 8pm, while the Asian participants would be participating between 8pm – 2am in their local time zones. Other associations with large numbers of participants in different time zones have addressed this problem by dividing the conference into three days in which each day schedule is centered around one of the time zones. I think there are still other alternatives to be explored to address this inconvenience. Fortunately, the AHP/ANP participants were very gracious about the timeframe and participated enthusiastically even in the closing ceremony which was the last event to take place on Sunday, December 6th at 2pm. You will find in this *IJAHP* issue a news article and reflections on the ISAHP2020 event, and an essay by me that is an academic summary and reflection on the addresses by the keynote and plenary speakers.

My personal conclusion about the future of conferences is that virtual presentations are here to stay and that all conferences will be hybrid in the future. Even when we are able to return to meeting in physical spaces, an online component will be needed so as not to ignore the large number of participants that would like to participate but cannot be physically present. Once they have enjoyed being part (albeit virtually) of a conference,

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they will not want to be left out in the future and the conference organizers should not ignore this important part of participation. Still, one thing that became clear at ISAHP2020 is that we long to see and meet each other with a big hug and an even bigger smile. We want to raise a glass of wine to toast to each other's health, or to the conference success, or simply to life; we long for the human touch!

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