

FLEAT III

An Organization Primer

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"Conference organization is a constant weighing and judging of alternatives."

Nulla mensa sine impensa. (There's no free lunch.) When applied to conference planning, never was a phrase more truly spoken. Everything to do with a conference has a cost—either in time, money, space, or personnel. Conference organization is a constant weighing and judging of alternatives. Optimally such judging is done with the theme and goals of the conference in mind. But, in reality, logistics and carrying capacity of venue are just as important to the success of a conference. This has certainly been the experience of the FLEAT III Organizing Committee—August 12 – 16, 1997 will tell us how well we have balanced all the alternatives.

In the meantime, let us look at how FLEAT III has been organized—what has (to date) worked, what has not, and what we might change for next time. In conference organizing there are a few things that are linear—i.e. do A before B—but there are far more that are non-linear (some might say "chaotic")—i.e. do A and B together with small bits of A influencing B and *vice versa*. But let us, as they say in the natural sciences, start from first principles.

Committees: Selecting the Crew

First of all came the decision to host the conference. With FLEAT III this idea grew from Bob Henderson and Bob's close ties to LLA (Language Laboratory Association of Japan). Peter Liddell, Academic Director of the UVic Language Centre, agreed to host FLEAT III after talking with a number of colleagues at IALL '93 (not to mention talking to the UVic Language Centre staff first!). Work on FLEAT started in earnest at IALL '95 in Notre Dame.

It has been a long journey from IALL '93 until now, but several committees have been central to the development of the conference—not the least important of which has been the **Program Committee**. Actually, we should say Program Committees—because of its international nature, the conference

had committees both in North America and Japan. Akio Iwasaki and Peter and I, with some early assistance from LeeAnn Stone, formed the major link between the **LLA Program Committee** and the **North American Program Committee (NAC)**. Without email this link would have been impossible to maintain in a timely fashion. We think that over 1,000 messages have been exchanged between Japan and the UVic Language Centre for FLEAT III.

Because the Conference is to be held in North America, fine tuning of all decisions had to be made by NAC. Chaired by Bruce Parkhurst and comprised of Ursula Williams, Mike Ledgerwood, Michael Nieckoski, and Peter Liddell, the North American Committee has been responsible for taking information from all sources and guiding the shape of the conference. As a group, they have made optimal selections and decisions. It then becomes the responsibility of the Local Committee to operationalize these decisions. A great deal of to-ing and fro-ing has been handled by these three committees. In the final analysis, one or two people sat down and drafted the outline for others on the committee to fine tune into a program.

As well as working with the NAC, the Local Committee has to negotiate with vendors and exhibitors, undertake hardcopy design, do Web layout and programming, handle registration and meet the technical needs of each presenter and vendor. We have been lucky at the University of Victoria in that we have been able to handle much of this "in-house" from the Language Centre itself. Stewart Arneil and Hillary Street have done all the Web work, Greg Fanning has done the hardcopy design and layout, Judy Nazar and Tamara Modry are handling registration and Judson Tunnel and Joanne Walker are seeing to technical requirements. Coordinating at the center (the calm eye of the hurricane?) of all this are Peter Liddell and Mary Sanseverino.

A further committee is involved—the **Editorial Committee**. This committee devises submission guidelines and adjudicates the articles submitted by the presenters. FLEAT III plans to publish a selective Proceedings and months can be cut off the time it takes to edit and produce proceedings if all presenters know and stick to the format guidelines.

Venues—Estimating and Booking

Committees aside, one cannot start to book venues too early. This was especially true for FLEAT III. The majority of the bookings for rooms and other accommodations were done 12 to 18 months in advance. However, there were certain things that we could not book. Because FLEAT III is running at the same time that classes are in session, we were not allowed to

book classroom space until after courses were put in place. For a sizeable conference like FLEAT, with the heavy technical requirements of its presenters, this meant more than a little "horse trading" with various departments on campus.

The goal of venue reservation was to keep everything as close together as possible. However, some tradeoffs needed to be made—room size, equipment availability, Internet connectivity—all of these have played an important role in selecting venues.

At one time the Local Committee seriously considered holding FLEAT III off-campus at the downtown Conference Centre. The pluses for this site were its location, its ability to house the entire conference under one roof and the availability of experienced staff. However, with a conference this heavily reliant on technology and Internet connectivity, the University was the only logical choice. As well, the cost at the downtown location was significantly more than at the University.

Internet and Print— Finding the mix

Email (mainly for organizational communications, but also for presentation submissions, sending registration and conference information) and the World Wide Web (for conference and travel information and registration) have played a pivotal role in organizing this conference. Because of the in-house expertise available in the Language Centre, we have spent as much time creating Web pages for the Call for Participation, Registration, and Program updating as we have for creating hardcopy for the same purposes.

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On the "con" side is the time involved. When both Web and print are employed, a great deal of duplication tends to happen, but not always as simple "copy and paste" from one medium to the other. The material is the same, but Web and hardcopy each have their own distinctive strengths. Development time for both media is quite long. Moreover, for the web-based materials, it is important to have assistance right at hand should anything go wrong—nothing will annoy people faster than an interactive web site that fails to interact, or starts to interact incorrectly.

On the "pro" side of this same coin is the greater saturation and "presence" amongst potential delegates and presenters. With the Web and other Internet constructs—like listservers and email—it is easy and cheap to get messages out. Also, this electronic method of issuing a Call for Participation tends to attract people who have a technological bent, which is just what we wanted for FLEAT III.

Keeping it all Together— Handling the Data

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FLEAT III has generated a great deal of presenter and delegate data. Handling these data so that decisions can be made, resources allocated and delegates contacted is not a trivial process. The majority of FLEAT III registrations were made via the web, but, because of restrictions on the web server, we were not able to feed information directly into a database or to use a secure server that could take credit card information. This added a few steps to the registration process.

The process we decided upon was as follows:

1. Registration via the Web or email
2. Acknowledgement back to delegate via email requesting payment
3. Payment received via fax, phone or post
4. Confirmation that payment has been received via email
5. Mail the FLEAT III Conference kit upon receipt of payment.

FLEAT III registrations received via fax and through the post are variously accommodated, according to whether or not the delegate has email.

The Pre-Conference Workshops posed another twist—although these are free, delegates could only be confirmed into a workshop after receipt of conference fees. This required us to “chase down” a few delegates—another time-consuming activity. As well, slotting delegates into their choices is something that the human eye handles far more efficiently than the computer, so we did this by hand, using a large pin-board.

Because Victoria is a major vacation destination (consistently in Condé-Nast’s Top Ten world sites), the Local Committee put together a varied family program for FLEAT delegates and their families. Administering this program made more calls on the database. The key in designing the web form was to make it as easy as possible to move information from the on-line registration form to the database, keeping in mind the different output that is necessary for each delegate. We kept track of all of the workshops each delegate requested, which ones they got, which special events they requested, and the costs/payments for each. Then a mail merge was done to produce receipts for these and for the conference payment. This information is also vital when putting together the individual conference kits, to ensure that everyone gets tickets for the events they selected.

Vendors and Commercial Sponsors

The FLEAT III Local Committee has actively solicited sponsorship from several sources, targeting particularly the most prominent suppliers. The Commercial Sponsors are Sony, Tandberg, and Sounds Virtual (the Can-8 system). Each of these groups contributed to the conference by sponsoring at

least one event: Sony—the Opening Reception and a lunch; Tandberg—a lunch and gifts for the delegates' Registration Package; Sounds Virtual—a lunch. The conference organizers are very grateful for their substantial support.

Many other companies and individuals with CALL-related services and products were also contacted or approached the Local Committee. They will exhibit in the Vendors' Mall.

In retrospect, dealing with vendors and commercial sponsors "in house" is a job that should probably have been handled by a separate group, whose only function would have been to work with the vendors. Vendors have their own specific needs and require as much time and attention as presenters.

Technology, Teamwork and Attention to Detail

Probably the most complex aspect of FLEAT III was the large amount of technology involved, much of which needed to be considered "a moveable feast," available in the different venues at different times. Close coordination and skilled assistance were essential.

For FLEAT III there are eight technology support teams. Each team leader is responsible for a designated area, ensuring that the right equipment is set up and checked as and where it is needed, that all software runs, that all projection equipment works, and that speakers' A/V materials run as expected. The leader is also responsible for equipment security.

Checklists and a daily choreography tell team members when and where to be, with what technology, and for whom.

The technology teams also schedule time with the presenters to set up and test software and give the presenters a feel for the presentation room.

Food and Fun

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FLEAT III will feature a wide array of special events—dinner at Butchart Gardens, a walking tour of downtown Victoria, an opening reception, dinner, free lunches, a closing Native Feast, and a special ceremony to honor Bob Henderson and Marie Sheppard. This is to say nothing of the IALL and LLA meetings that will also be held, or the refreshment breaks. In all of this a good caterer and display contractor for the vendors booths are invaluable. Both are fairly expensive, but the money is well spent, because good people in these positions will save hours and hours of headaches.

The major special events at FLEAT III are the Vendors' Trade Mall and the closing Native Feast. Our display contractor, Rick Burgess from Victoria Display, has been invaluable—his local contacts have filled in any blank spots we might have had. We also sub-contracted the catering for the final dinner, which also saved huge amounts of time.

The Family Program that is accompanying FLEAT III is being handled by the same sub-contractor, however FLEAT III Registration is doing all of the initial registration. Early in the process, we considered sub-contracting registration to UVic Conference Services, and decided to keep it in-house because it was so complex to track individual registrations for the pre-conference workshops, the various special events, and the billing system. Judy Nazar, the registration secretary, felt that she would spend the same amount of time on the phone to Conference Services as she would doing everything through the Language Centre. Another consideration was IALL's tradition of "personal touch" conferences. This way, the registration staff know the needs of the delegates much better and can avoid some of the pitfalls of arm's-length registration. We hope this type of personal service will bear fruit at the conference!

Putting it all Together—or Keeping Your Head

It is very easy to become ensnared in the details of running a conference—to the point where nightmares plague the organizers—equipment could break down, keynote speakers might get laryngitis, or how about organizing a party to which nobody comes? In the end, good planning and good people will probably win out. Yes, a few things will inevitably go awry, but the aim of a conference is to confer—and if you give people with similar interests an opportunity to meet and talk with one another then conferring is bound to happen, even if a bulb does blow at the last minute!

With FLEAT III we have planned for a lot of technological "whiz-bang," but the real goal of this international conference is to provide an atmosphere where people interested in language learning, education and technology can meet with one another "live," discuss situations they have in common, and learn from one another's differences. In this respect, we hope FLEAT III will more than match its theme—Languages, Resources, Cultures.

We'll only really know on August 17, 1997, I suppose.

Scis quod dicunt: quod fiat, fiat. (You know what they say: *que será, será.*) ■