

# **CYC Conferences: Reflections, Insights and Suggestions**

**Jenny McGrath**

I have been hearing a lot about CYC conferences lately. Some good. Some not so good. So, I am writing my thoughts with the hope of offering some perspective, insight and ideas.

I am currently working as a tenured faculty and Department Chair of a Canadian Child and Youth Care degree program. Yes, that certainly grants me privilege. I am paid well, I can usually get the time to attend conferences, I am allotted some personal professional development money and I can apply for additional funding within my institution. But this position also brings responsibility. I need stay involved and informed about what is happening in our field so when I go into the classroom, I am teaching future CYC professionals from a place that is current, critical and reflective. One of the ways I keep engaged and passionate about my work is by attending conferences.

I am not funded for all the conferences that I attend. Never have been, never will be. That is an unrealistic expectation. I am going to the Canadian national conference in Newfoundland and Labrador because I think it is important for me to be there, however, because I chose to use my available Professional Development money to support my travel to the World Conference in South Africa last summer, this one is out of pocket. I will stay with friends to cut down on my expenses.



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I have not always been an academic. In 2000, I was working front-line in a group care program with youth, making a meagre salary. I was selected by my employer to attend the CYC international conference in Cleveland, Ohio. All my expenses were paid but I shared a room with three of my coworkers and I was expected, upon my return, to provide workshops about what I learned to those who were unable to attend the conference. I was also expected to help plan the next Canadian national conference that was to be held in my home province. Having the privilege of attending the Cleveland conference is likely the only reason I am still working in this field today. I was seriously considering completing a master's program in another discipline so I could find professional space with a unified purpose. When I walked into that conference, I felt like I had found "my people". I am still here, practicing CYC some 20 years later.

Since that time, I have attended every Canadian national CYC conference, every CYC world conference, several *Unity through Relationship*, several provincial, and several international conferences. The conferences I missed, were not because I was not interested or could not find the means to attend. The reality is, I had to work because it was not my turn to go. A few of these experiences were fully funded, some were partially funded, but for many, I covered all costs myself. I have also helped plan many of the above. I share this to illustrate my varied experience with conferences in the hope that the thoughts I share here might be of use to people who are struggling to find ways to attend conferences and support their professional development.

I want to highlight a few things about the planning and expenses of CYC conferences:

- Our conferences are typically organized by CYC associations, led by a small group of volunteers. If not connected to an association, they are



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still organized by a small group of dedicated volunteers. Unity through Relationships in Ireland is a prime example of this. These professional associations do not have large operating budgets to incur conference expenses. In fact, they chose to run conferences, despite the enormous work involved, in part to gain much need revenue to support the work of their association.

- Conferences are expensive. Full stop. Even when you try to collaborate with others and get space donated, which is possible with some of the smaller conferences, there are still many expenses. Some conferences are able to secure sponsorships and grants to offset costs, but most cannot. Conference fees are determined to ensure that at minimum, the organizers break even, but preferably they also make some money for their Association.
- National and international conferences typically have a minimum of 300 participants. Very few venues can accommodate space for that number of people. For example, I work at a decent sized university and the largest auditorium we have holds 200 people. And this space doesn't come cheap either because colleges and universities also see conferences services as a revenue generator. Therefore, the larger conferences are typically held at hotels or conference centers because they have the space, staffing and resources to be able to support the larger numbers. These venues are expensive.
- In recent years organizers have decided to provide lunches and/or breakfasts which certainly adds to the expenses. But in many cases, this has been done so they can offer shorter lunch breaks and a more extensive program. It is exciting that more and more people are submitting presentation proposals, but there is only so much time in



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the schedule so shortening breaks means more people can present which in turn provides more varied sessions to participants.

- Lastly, but I think this is an important point. The volunteers who organize these conferences and events do so because they want to provide space for CYC professionals to learn, to engage and to collaborate. I commend everyone for the work you do to provide these opportunities.

I know everyone wants to attend conferences but do not always have the support or the means. What follows are some suggestions that have worked for me.

- **Volunteer.** With your professional association. With a conference committee. With a student club. If you are part of the planning, you will be at the conference. I have been at every conference in the province I have lived in, because I was on the committee. And even though you will miss some of the sessions because you are working, you will still have opportunities for learning and collaboration. And in my opinion, this is the most valuable aspect of conferences.
- **Speak to your employer or to your school.** Express your interest in attending a conference and clearly explain why you think there will be value in it for you, and for them. To do this you will also need to indicate what you are willing to do to have this opportunity. For example, link it to your learning goals, courses or supervision plans; offer to run workshops for others when you return; and offer to share expenses. Part of this may be advocating around the importance of training for yourself and others. But believe me, it is worth the effort.



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- **Apply for grants, scholarships and bursaries.** Most college and university programs will have some options for this. If you are unsure what is available to you, ask your Department Chair, faculty, research office, or student union.
- **Fundraise.** When I was working in residential care, my colleagues sold chocolate covered almonds for three years so they could attend a conference in another province. I know practitioners and students who have held bake sales and flea markets.
- **Collaborate with others to present.** I have presented at every conference since my first one because my employers were more likely to support me financially if I was doing a presentation. That has been my reality. An interesting point is that I have never presented alone because I see much value in sharing the experience with others. I also learned much about presenting strategies because I was supported by my mentors. For my first few conferences, I asked people to support me in my learning process. Now, I support others. Remember that conference committees cannot accept every proposal that is submitted, so I recommend topics that are relevant to a varied audience.
- **Find cheaper or shared accommodation** than the conference hotel. In all the conferences that I have attended, I have only once had my own room (and this was not intentional). When I know I am going to a conference, I reach out to my conference buddies and we make plans for room sharing. Some of the best learning, connections and friendships I have are as a direct result of this. And now, I do not need



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to wait until the next conference to find support and a unique perspective because I have CYC friends that I can call at any time.

- **Attach your personal holidays to conferences.** This may not work for everyone, but I often plan my holidays around the conference schedule. If a conference is being held in a place I have not yet been, I get the opportunity to see new parts of my country and new parts of the world. My friend, Frank Delano, and I have now had meals together in every province in Canada, multiple US states and six countries. We have made this a very fun conference event over the years. In fact, our first meal together was at my first conference in 2000. I share this to show how valuable these experiences can be!
- **Get an airmiles card.** I purchase everything on my visa so I can build up my travel points. If I cannot get funding for travel, I tell my employer that I will cover my airfare and share accommodations. It is then easier to ask if they would be willing to cover some of the other costs.
- **Open a conference/travel account.** I have had one for twenty years. I put whatever I can afford into it. The amount has varied over the years. Some months I can't afford anything, but when I need to reach into it, it makes travel possible. I would have never been able to travel to South Africa without it. And that is with funding from my employers and sharing accommodation.
- **If you have the privilege of attending a conference, step outside your preferred social group and meet new people.** Attend the social events. Take in a workshop that you think will challenge you. Learn



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about the history of our field. Explore new possibilities for where we can go!

I hope to see you at a future CYC conference! Come say hello or join Frank and I for a meal!

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