

The UKSG Conference: Experience of a first-time delegate

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As a somewhat recently recruited member of Lancaster University's Content Team (I cannot quite believe how long-ago January 2020 actually was!) my chief experience of UKSG, prior to the April 12th to 14th Conference, was through the UKSG eNews, co-edited by Lancaster's own Josh Sendall. It was Josh who kindly offered me the opportunity to share with the eNews readership my experience attending the 2021 Conference as a first-time delegate.

Although I have attended multiple-day conferences in the past as part of my academic research work I had yet to take part in such an event that was totally digital. Yet even without a yardstick for comparison I can confidently say the guidance provided in advance, and indeed throughout the event, was in my estimation clear, comprehensive and much appreciated. The events being so simply set out in Underline was definitely an aid to navigating the voluminous content. I would also be remiss to not highlight the excellent introduction on Gathertown provided by Brian Lewis, who I did not fail to notice virtually manning the helpdesk throughout.

That being said, I don't think I could have ever been totally prepared for the scale of the conference, or indeed, the range of topics with which to engage. Keen to just get stuck in I opted for [BS7 – Teaching with primary sources in the virtual classroom](#). My academic background in History, and experience teaching at HE level has emphasised for me the importance of primary source access, which has of course, like many other aspects of the student experience, been significantly impacted by COVID-19. The experience of using resources, that are often only available physically, in the earlier part of a degree scheme, which feeds into the often more heavily weighed assessments in later years, is vital. While the effects of this are no doubt widespread there is a particular risk posed to the Arts and Humanities, the Social Sciences, as well as courses dealing with race, gender and class across traditional departmental and subject divides.

So, with an ongoing interest in how students can make best use of primary source material for their work I was eager to hear about the topic from the range of speakers the panel included (Dr. Ben Lacey, Dr. Katherine Harbord, and Steve McIndoe). The session did not disappoint and I was glad to see the speakers not only exploring the issues that COVID-19 restrictions and totally digital online learning has highlighted, but some of the broader methodological questions around utilizing such material. In regards to being able to plan out my time at the conference, and make sure I could engage with areas of particular relevance or interest (as well as to spot panels on engaging topics I had no real prior experience with), the formatting and structure of events provided by Underline was particularly helpful. Along with BS7, I earmarked the panel [BS28 – The Changing Face of Primary Sources](#) (presented by Hugh Murphy) early on, and being able to attend both and then the subsequent Q&As made further engagement tremendously convenient. Similarly, on the topic of Underline, the ability to pause, skip back or slow a section of any panel was a welcome one, and certainly a benefit I appreciated when it came to some of the more technical talks I was attempting to get my head around. The fact that the collection of content remains available for six months following the conference itself is also a genuine boon.

With only one panel under my belt I opted next to see [BS5 - University Futures, Library Futures: Lessons from the Pandemic for Reimagining the Future of our Institutions](#), by Andrew Barker and Professor Simon Guy. This was another topic on which I felt I was on firmer ground, having taken part in the therein mentioned planning workshops around the developing Lancaster strategy, and it was exciting to see the work of so many colleagues presented to such a wide audience and follow the back and forth of questions and feedback on the vision being put forward.

Getting my bearing as the day progressed, with Andrew's opening address and the [Monday plenary sessions](#) giving me a sense of just how expansive and diverse the proceedings would be. I found Tasha Mellins-Cohen's discussion of society publishers as collaborative partners particularly interesting. From there I attempted to split my time between panels where I might get to glimpse some of the most recent technical developments (specifically around Open Access and the use of metadata – [B25 Exploring Open Access Books](#)) and those with that dealt with broader issues, especially accessibility ([BS20- How to get started with your Accessibility Programme & Accessibility and Complex Digital Resources](#)). Other highlights included the thought provoking [BS31 Night Words: Obliteration and Social Media's Ever-Evolving Cost-Benefit Calculus](#) by Adam Blackwell, which raised a number of issues around online communications that I am sure will only become increasingly crucial as the digital age advances. Similarly engaging in a pleasingly futurist manner was Dr. Michael M. Lee's Technical Session '[It's 2021 – Where are all the robots?](#)'.

In amongst all that was on offer I think it would have been easy to defy the outlined schedule and head off the beaten track but I resisted doing so and reaped the benefits. The [second day plenary session](#) (featuring talks from Abel L Packer, Yang Pan and Professor Frederick Ato Armah) was an example of getting more than I imagined from being able to listen to three speakers from diverse geographical regions. These talks came together to deliver something that was greater than the sum of its parts.

Reflecting on proceedings since April, I am aware both of how much I had learned, but also how much I had missed, or perhaps had flown a bit over my head. In particular, some of the more technical talks were conducted at such an evidently expert level, that I found myself trying to catch up between sessions with some swift Google research when feeling under-

informed. I had my eye out for a panel or session that might be aimed specifically at those at the early stage in their careers, or conference newcomers such as myself. While there is definitely some excitement to jumping in at the deep end, I think such a panel might be a welcome addition for others in the future.

In hindsight I regret not taking greater advantage of some of the social opportunities that were on offer. While I enjoyed using the virtual lounge and exhibition space I fell foul of a touch of social anxiousness and did not attend the quiz, nor the intriguingly titled 'Chair Yoga'. This is something I would definitely been keen to remedy if I am fortunate enough to attend again in future (the quiz I mean, with all apologies to Chair Yoga).

(UKSG note - currently the conference content linked to above is available to registered delegates only)

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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