

Overheard at the JMM

By Robert W. Vallin

“You can learn a lot more from listening than you can from talking,” they say. I decided to put this to the test. I spent a lot of my time at the 2009 Joint Mathematics Meetings in meetings: Committee meetings, subcommittee meetings, business meetings, lunch meetings, breakfast meetings, and more. When I was not in meetings, I was at events and sessions. While I was doing all this, I tried to listen. Here are some of the things I heard.

“It’s not my generation. What’s a wiki?”

A wiki is “a page or collection of Web pages designed to enable anyone who accesses it to contribute or modify content, using a simplified markup language,” says Wikipedia. The MAA has created wikis for both the Joint Meetings and MathFest. The JMM wiki is at <http://jointmathmeetings.pbworks.com/>. From the user’s point of view, they are just web sites; what makes them wikis is that the pages can easily be updated by anyone who has been given access. In particular, this allows last-minute updates and “insider” information to appear.

Here is an example: in 2009, the poster session required almost 200 judges. When we tried to notify those that had been selected to judge, several of the emails were eaten by spam filters. As the meeting neared, people not only did not know if they were judging, but also were not sure whom to contact. The abstract booklet for the Undergraduate Poster Session was on the wiki, however, and it included a list of judges. Just as you would not go to a meeting without having visited the meeting’s webpage, you should not go to the JMM or MathFest without checking the wiki for the meeting.

Starting with the last MathFest (Portland, OR), MAA is also twittering the meetings.

“I enjoyed that more than I thought I would.”

Perhaps that was an undergraduate who, in exchange for a travel stipend, had to attend the panel on how to choose a graduate school. Maybe it was a skeptical faculty member after a session on a new type of pedagogy. The simple fact is that there are so many things going on that most of it will be something you are not familiar with or don’t realize you are interested in. I saw a group of students walking by the entrance to the Graduate School Fair. One looked inside wistfully, the others thought it had nothing to do with them and pushed on. Who knows what kind of doors would have opened for all of them if they’d looked around? As your mother said when introducing you to broccoli, “Try it, maybe you’ll like it.”

“I can’t believe the computer froze in the middle of my talk.”

If you really want to see who someone really is, watch when a disaster hits. In this case, it was an undergraduate talk. The student handled things masterfully. He kept his cool and, more importantly, his sense

of humor. Even though technology is improving, some things never change. Once I was at a talk where the presenter had two overhead projectors to use and both of the light bulbs blew out during the talk. Everyone should know this about presenting a poster or a paper: the audience wants you to succeed. The last thing they want is to have to sit through a failed talk. So when glitches happen, relax and do your best. No one could, and no one would, ask for more. Of course, if you can, also have overheads as a backup.

“I haven’t seen you since ____!”

This is a popular phrase. I heard this time and time again. I’m sure you can find people out there who say that “The meeting should just be for mathematical discourse.” These are the same people who don’t like minicourses, student speakers, Math Jeopardy, and those Whos down in Whoville. You collect people as you go through life: those you were an undergraduate/graduate student with or were at your REU, colleagues from your post-doc or previous jobs, and the friends from your research area. Snail mail, email, and Facebook help you keep in touch, but meeting in person is much better. Who knows, perhaps a paper or two can come out of it to satisfy the grinchies.

“I hope I won a prize.”

I heard this one when the prizes were given out at the Undergraduate Poster Session. This particular group of people had poster N. When it was announced that poster N-1 had won, they all jumped. Close. Then, when poster N+1 was announced, they sagged. No cigar. But none of them looked that upset. The poster session is really not about winning a prize. It’s more about the excitement of showing your research to others who show real interest in your work, listening intently while you explain what you did and suggesting new directions for your research. The prizes are icing on the cake: it’s great to win one, but if one doesn’t, the experience is not ruined.

Now is the time to get ready for 2010 Joint Mathematical Meetings. The program is fantastic and all we need is you.

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