

# Grateful for In-Person Meetings



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While COVID-19 is by no means gone completely, it feels like life is finally returning to normal here in Japan. To be sure, there are still things that have not gone back to the way they were before, but recently much that was not available for many years has returned. Reflecting on the pandemic, I am reminded again of just how much of an impact it had on the entire world and in so many parts of everyday life. Indeed, as things begin to transition back to how they were before, various experiences have made me realize how much balance was lost in the life of scientists due to the pandemic. In particular, reflecting on the lack of in-person academic meetings during the pandemic has made me see just how important this is for one's growth as a scientist.

I think many of you will recall the confusion when the pandemic first started. It seemed everything was shut down and changes were happening quickly. Along with everything else, academic conferences were also being canceled. Indeed, for a while, everything but the bare minimum was reduced to an online environment. And then gradually as everyone became aware of and more comfortable with the various online resources, some conferences were able to continue by being put online. I was glad to be able to participate in some conferences online, both domestic and international.

In fact, there are some convenient aspects to online conferences. Despite the online format, there was still amazing research at these online conferences, and removing the need for travel made it much more convenient to present my research internationally. Indeed, I could continue a normal work schedule and participate in the conference as it took place on the other side of the world. And while seeing new places is fascinating, the lack of cost and travel time was good. In many ways, conferences became much more accessible than I ever imagined possible. Indeed, the online format made it so that there were even more ways access research during a conference than ever before.

And yet, there was also a sense of deep loss. As I worked my way through the online environments at these conferences, in the end it all seemed so isolating.

As the vaccine became widely available and travel

became possible again, I have been glad to participate in in-person conferences once more. And with this came the realization of just how important in-person connection is when discussing research. In-person meetings provide a balance to one's research direction that is hard to substitute with online venues.

One such revelation came when I had the chance to participate in an international conference with participants from all over the world. It was one of the first times in a while where almost everyone came to Japan to participate. In addition to the oral presentations and the poster sessions, it was surprising to me how amazing it was to just network with other scientists. If I had only read their research articles, I would have missed so much about how they developed their projects and approached their science. Furthermore, while it is difficult to report failed experiments in publications, I think every scientist understands that this is a part of the process. Networking allows you to see that everyone can have similar struggles and hearing how the scientists I met overcame them was very encouraging to me. Indeed, it made me highly motivated to go back and try more in my own research. It also gave me a lot of perspective about how my research fit into the larger story of my field of study, in a way that reading lots of research articles could not.

Finally, I think it is more important now than ever to let the next generation of scientists have this experience as well. I had taken the process of conferences and posters for granted. During a recent smaller conference within my department at Kyoto University, however, I realized that students who entered during the pandemic missed this experience. The conference had an in-person poster session and one of the students in my lab, who was well into his degree, mentioned that he had never seen a poster session before in his life. While I had taken it for granted, even a simple poster session could be novel for students who were only allowed to learn online for these past few years. I can only hope that even with these irregular experiences during their study, that the students of today can soon enjoy the benefits of sharing research in in-person settings.