

Meeting report: second ISHPSSB off-year workshop

Eric Collin Martin

Received: 8 January 2007 / Accepted: 13 February 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

At dusk on a summer evening in Bloomington, as mosquitoes and fireflies hovered amidst a congregation of academics, the conversational volume went up as the sun (and drinks) went down. Yet nowhere among the din of voices could one hear the accusatorial phrases, “*that’s* not history,” or “is that *really* philosophy?”

Indeed, an ecumenical spirit was pervasive at this second off-year meeting. The meeting, roughly patterned after the first such conference in San Francisco two years ago, took place at Indiana University on July 26–30 and was organized by graduate students Jason Byron, Matt Dunn, and Lisa Onaga. Twenty faculty and forty graduate students attended the meeting, representing over 35 institutions from the US, New Zealand, Israel, Canada, Mexico, and the UK.

The off-year meeting is not primarily a forum for presenting papers; rather, it provides an opportunity for the community to identify topics of emerging interest, while helping graduate students to develop their research. The meeting continued its vision to serve young scholars and to anticipate and encourage future directions in research. This year, however, the focus on philosophy was less central, as the society continued to promote an integrative approach to studying biology that has been a tradition in ISHPSSB. The gathering attracted scholars from across the disciplinary spectrum, including the biological sciences, history, literary studies, sociology, medicine, and anthropology. It proved to be fertile ground for graduate students to exchange ideas with one another and to form relationships with faculty in an inclusive atmosphere. With the variety of academic traditions present, interdisciplinarity and collaboration remained central themes that were addressed from various perspectives.

The conference was divided into four distinct types of sessions: plenary, roundtable, break-out, and “happy office hours,” which combine office hours with happy hour. Each session was organized around a theme, and helped to focus the long days of meetings into manageable segments.

The plenary sessions provided a chance for faculty to present some of their recent and in-progress work. The topics ranged from laboratory architecture to evolutionary

E. C. Martin (✉)

Philosophy Department and Science Studies Program, University of California, San Diego, CA, USA
e-mail: ecmartin@ucsd.edu

psychology and sexual selection. In one plenary session, Paul Griffiths spoke on the public understanding of genetics, asking how the HPS tradition relates to the extant research on public understanding of science. Gar Allen provided an historical analysis of the economic influences upon the direction of 20th century genetics research, while Mike Lynch discussed DNA fingerprinting as an aspect of biological evidence in the courtroom. And in the final plenary, the conference concluded, somehow appropriately, with Joe Cain's analysis of the social significance of jokes and pranks within scientific communities.

Break-out sessions brought a particular topic into focus with two or three papers that participants would read beforehand. Discussions were lead by a small group of faculty or graduate students, and often moved beyond the scope of the texts as participants spoke of their own interests in the material. Lindley Darden and Roberta Millstein were on hand to discuss (and defend) their respective papers on mechanism concepts in natural selection. One welcome perspective that was relatively new to the group, and which became especially apparent in the break-out sessions, came from those working within the medical sciences. Discussions on cancer research and concepts of genetic disease were met with high praise from participants, and Fred Tauber's viewpoint as an M.D. added a helpful voice to the broad interest in these topics.

The roundtable sessions addressed topics of both theoretical and practical interest, from gender to the job market. Jim Griesemer spoke on ways to embrace interdisciplinarity while retaining a project's relevance for scholars who will likely seek tenure in a traditional department. While recognizing the risks of interdisciplinary research topics, the panel emphasized their benefits. One discussion centered on the intersection of biology studies with gender studies. Another roundtable was devoted to publishing and jobs, highlighting the meeting's noteworthy dedication to career development.

The now-institutionalized 'happy office hours' provided an opportunity for students to interact with faculty in a less formal atmosphere over pints at the local bars. Students could follow faculty to a particular location, or wander between watering holes in a peculiarly academic bar-crawl.

F-DIBS was sponsored by ISHPSSB, the History and Philosophy of Science Department at Indiana University, the National Science Foundation, and Indiana University's Office for the Vice President of Research. The meeting received high marks for its inclusiveness and superb organization, and it should continue to be a welcome forum to facilitate interaction and collaboration among STS researchers.