

## How to Organize an International Conference

### Judith Logsdon-Dubois



*In college, I majored in French and also studied German, Spanish, Greek, and Latin. I joined the Peace Corps to teach English in Cameroon. I moved with my family to France in 1984 and began teaching English in afternoon and evening classes for adults. I acquired a DEA in English literature and taught translation for a branch of the University of Bordeaux until 2005. I first heard of TPRS Storytelling® in 2005 and, like Stephen Krashen, I'm convinced it's the most effective method to teach languages in use today. I organized the first TPRS workshop in France which was held in Agen in August, 2013.*

*Participants came from seven different countries. Last year participants came from 23 different countries. I am now organizing the sixth Agen Workshop, which will open on July 23rd, 2018 and last five days. <http://tprs-witch.com>*

The Agen Workshop was a bit of an accident. Christopher Columbus thought he was on his way to India, and I thought I was organizing a conference for English teachers in France.

### Dreaming Out Loud

I was extremely fortunate in having met Teri Wiechart at NTPRS in Minneapolis and that she remembered me. We connected on the moretpers listserv and began dreaming out loud. Teri accepted my invitation to come to Agen in 2013 and since then has helped me tremendously with her experience and knowledge of coaching and of who is who in the TPRS world. I had also met Lynnette St. George and Alike Last, and invited them as well. Perhaps the first ingredients of a successful conference are experienced users of the method who can model a typical class.

## Presenters



*Sabrina Sebban-Janczak, teaching the French Language Lab, Agen, 2016*

In later years, as we grew, we needed more presenters and I began looking at some of the better-known presenters. I discovered that people I knew only as “big names” were incredibly generous. They were usually willing to travel to France as long as their travel expenses were covered. I have not yet met anyone who is in this

for the money. Everyone I have dealt with believes that helping teachers learn to use Comprehensible Input methods is something worthwhile and important and that we are helping to make the world a better place.



*Blaine Ray, Agen 2017*

## Location

I then needed a place to hold the conference. My first thoughts were Bordeaux or Toulouse, two large neighboring cities that would have all the facilities and could accommodate visitors without any problem. But my budget was too modest to envision renting rooms in a big hotel, so I began looking closer to home. And I soon discovered that the Centre Culturel of Agen could rent rooms at a very reasonable rate, even for my limited means. And since Agen is not considered a big tourist attraction,



hotel and restaurant prices were off-season and affordable. Only later did I realize how ideal Agen was for my purposes. International travelers can take the TGV (high speed train) from either Bordeaux, Toulouse, or Paris. The train station is downtown, within walking distance of our site, the main restaurants, and hotels. That means that our participants do not need a car for

transportation and are not shut up in a gigantic hotel miles and miles from the heart of the city, which sometimes happens.

### **Budget and “profit”**



*With Dr. Stephen Krashen, Agen 2017*

I had a site and I had presenters. Next I needed a budget. My first year, I estimated my costs and divided by a minimum number of participants. Later an English friend who is a retired accountant helped me set up something more detailed, and last year Lisa Hinkley Reyes gave me some good pointers. Of course, I learned that there are always unexpected, or unplanned costs. That means you need a “cushion” to absorb them. This is not

my strong point, so I try to find people who are better at bookkeeping than me to help out. My best advice, if you want to organize an international conference, is to forget the word “profit.” In my experience, profit is in hiding somewhere with the tooth fairy and the Easter rabbit. I work pretty hard all year round putting the conference together, but I’m very happy if we cover costs and have a little left over to prime the pump for next year. What I get out of it can’t be counted in euros or dollars and doesn’t go into the books.

### **Marketing**

With a budget, a site and presenters ready to go, I needed participants; I had to advertize the conference. I began by asking my daughter Kellie, who is a graphic artist, to design a flyer for me. I wanted it as professional as possible. When Kellie had too much work to continue with my flyers, she passed me on to a friend of hers, Julie Brault, who is very talented and has the time and patience to keep changing things until we get it right. Now she also prepares the Workshop Handbook which started out as the program and has now become a proper book. I have the flyer ready in November, so I can pass it out at the TESOL conference in Paris. Some years I have been able to have copies made in the States to be handed out to teachers there, but not on a large scale. I do have an ad in IJFLT each year.

### ***“A prophet in his own country”***

As for advertising the conference, in my case, the old adage about “a prophet in his own country” has held true. Only one of my former colleagues from the lycée has attended a workshop, and the articles that have appeared in the local newspapers have not been very convincing. One of the problems I encounter is

that the journalists fail to understand the purpose of the conference. They think of it as just one more language school with “an innovative method”. In general, the best articles were written by interns. They seemed to make the effort to try to understand and wrote more detailed articles. I suspect the “old hands” were a bit bored with my story, wanting something more earth-shaking or scandalous. Rather than spend a lot of time begging for articles, I now send them as much documentation as possible in French, including previous articles by other journalists. I have a description of TPRS in French on my web site and they quote from it.

There are other reasons why I don’t have many French teachers at the conference. Those who work for the Ministry of Education in France expect their professional development to be paid for by the ministry and to get time off from teaching their classes. Also, the French ministry’s official policy is currently in favor of problem-based learning, and I have not been able to convince their representatives that there is no fatal contradiction with Comprehensible Input strategies. I haven’t given up and I do have the support of some people who work in the universities and are interested in what is going on in Agen.

Almost all the teachers living in France who come to the conference first heard of me through TESOL International Association, an organization for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. In France, TESOL members usually work for private schools or independently. They have a large conference in Paris every year, the last weekend of November. They invite members to put in proposals for presentations every year and every time I have made a proposal I have been accepted as a speaker.

In 2012, I demonstrated TPRS in Croatian. I don’t speak Croatian and had planned on doing the demonstration in Ukrainian, having asked a woman I had met the day before to play along with me. (My original plan had been to work with my son Daniel, who teaches Breton, but he wasn’t able to come.) Unfortunately, the woman from the Ukraine wasn’t able to get to my presentation on time. Just before the beginning of my hour-long talk I saw a woman with a badge saying she was from Croatia and asked her to step in. To my amazement, it actually went quite well. We learned how to say, “has a car” in Croatian and I went around the room asking who had a car and what kind of car and of course the man from Saudi Arabia had a big silver Mercedes and the woman from Strasbourg had a little blue Renault and the man from the Netherlands had half a car. We laughed and had a good time. Although there were only twenty some people present, three of them decided to come to the conference to learn more about TPRS. They keep coming back and they keep bringing friends.

I have also been to local events sponsored by TESOL, in Bordeaux, Toulouse, Lyon, and Strasbourg. Even if only one person decides to come to Agen, I

know that that person may bring more next time, so my traveling expenses are justified.

My other source of participants was the internet. People on the moretpers list and people on Ben Slavic's Professional Learning Community knew me from my posts and decided to come to Agen. For those living in Europe it was much cheaper than going to a conference in the States. For American teachers of French, it was a chance to visit France and practice their French while getting some professional training. Those who taught Spanish or German or Italian could fit us in with their summer plans. I set up a web site and a Facebook page and try to post articles that may interest language teachers as often as possible. On Facebook I try to keep my professional page, TPRS Witch, separate from my personal page. Occasionally I post a warning to teachers that if they don't like my politics or are not interested in my grandchildren, they can unfollow me.

I spend a lot of time on the internet, following discussions and keeping up with new ideas. I don't plug the Workshop all the time, only when it seems relevant. I realize that while people appreciate information, they are quick to suspect ulterior motives. The most effective advertising strategy is word of mouth. Past participants have gone home very happy about their week in Agen and over the years we have acquired a reputation that is precious to me. It's something I'm determined to protect and maintain.

### **Competition or Collaboration?**

*"...in the TPRS World there is no such thing as competition."*

Agen 2018 will be our sixth conference. I have made mistakes and learned some lessons that I would like to share. One thing I realized is that in the TPRS/CI world there is no such thing as competition. Although Comprehensible Input has much better press now than it did a few years ago, there is still plenty of room to grow. I was just a little put out last year when some friends in the Netherlands organized a weekend conference that they called ETPRS, European TPRS. David Maconaghie had given that name to Agen when he came in 2013 and Ben Slavic had used it to talk about our conference. I had thought it lacked modesty at the time. After all, there were only 15 people in Agen that first year. When my Dutch friends started saying they were the first European TPRS conference, I did protest, so they settled for being the first TPRS conference in northern Europe.

But their conference did not harm us in any way. It was actually a big boost for Agen. Many Dutch, Belgian, and German teachers heard of my workshop in Agen for the first time at ETPRS. All of a sudden I was getting applications from all over the Netherlands. Now people are planning conferences in other

countries, and I'm very happy about it. Perhaps TPRS/CI conferences are addictive. You can never get enough.

This year Annie Beach and Cathy Elliott, who teach Indonesian in Australia, asked me if I would mind talking to them about how I organized the Agen Workshop, because they hope to organize conferences in Australia. They seemed almost embarrassed, as if they were asking me to give them the secret formula for Coca-Cola. Perhaps they thought that I might consider them as competition. The first idea that came to my mind was that it was flattering that they actually thought I knew what I was doing. The second thought was the more, the merrier. The more teachers that learn about Comprehensible Input methods, the more there are that might be tempted to spend a week in a lovely little town in southwest France, eating some of the best food in the world in charming little restaurants with ridiculously cheap prices, spending time with some amazingly passionate teachers, and meeting face to face their virtual friends from the internet. Annie was our first participant from Australia. Cathy joined her this year. I hope that next year there will be half a dozen from "Down Under."

### **The Secret Weapon**

#### *"I still haven't revealed my Secret Weapon..."*

I still haven't revealed my secret weapon, the essential element to having a successful conference, wherever you are. The secret weapon is accepting help from other people with different strengths and talents. I was very fortunate, right from the beginning, in having friends that believed in my dream, friends that were better organized and more methodical than I was. I've mentioned Teri Wiechart, but that first year would never have happened if Aicha Belkadi and Françoise Soriano hadn't believed in me. Françoise made lists and furnished a first aid kit and made coffee and tea and bought fresh fruit and taxied people right and left throughout the conference. She also reminded me that we would need toilet paper. Her devotion, enthusiasm and energy were inspiring. Her practical mind was invaluable. Lillian Stirling came as a participant that first year and has been back every year since then to help me make my dream come true. I rely heavily on her level head, her good humor and her ability to count. Sometimes Lillian can just cock her head and ask, "Is that really what you want?" to make me stop and think instead of getting carried away. Christine Brechmier is an adult student who has become a very good friend and is now an essential part of the workshop. Last year we realized that we needed a different system for the coffee and tea breaks. Christine took it over and ran it single-handedly this year. She did a great job and I'm still trying to figure out how to thank her.

