

SAMEA Conference YEE Scholarship journey 2017

After receiving an email confirming my success in applying for a SAMEA conference scholarship, I was left with shock and excitement as if I had never won anything in my life. I nonetheless composed myself and informed my superiors and planned through applying for leave.

Arrival night was unpleasant piece of adventure. The hotel could not find my name in the booking list and I was left confused and sad; but not broken because I managed to find accommodation in Randburg for that night. My luck changed the next morning as Gillian sorted the issues out despite her more than filled plate of registration work.

Pre-conference workshops:

The workshops were a great eye opener to me. Monday I attended: *Evaluative Monitoring Systems- How to Use Monitoring Data to Improve Project Decision-Making and Learning*. It was a great mix of group work, discussions and slide facilitation by the two ladies who often gave their experience and stories to add to their answers and explanations. The second workshop day, I attend the ever funny and engaging Prof. P. Sithole in: *Enhancing Qualitative Data Management, Analysis and Visualization Using Nvivo Software*, who first ensured we understood the bases and differences of quantitative and qualitative data before we dived into the software. The room he was given could have been a lot more strategically placed as it needed people with PCs (ample individual space and air conditioner are always important). This workshop led me curious about how qualitative data could be linked and displayed in maps (2D and 3D).

Mentor pairing was also one aspect for me that was important as I never had an official mentor before. I was encouraging to see the M&E community involved in the industry for the good of the industry and not only for themselves.

Conference Journey:

Learning circles gave me a renewed sense of confidence for my self-directed journey and also encouragement to do it with other people and not alone. The alliance on strengthening the evaluation profession was also another opener on how many people were interesting in growing the profession in the country- South Africa still cares.

The keynote speakers were not too above my grasp, as I could follow all the way. I also chose to attend strand 3 because my use of data as evidence in the projects I had been in had landed me in both a depressing (project heads with traditional; mindset) and impressed (department directors, who suggested I go into M&E professionally) situation. It was great to discover that there are a lot of people like me who want to and also encourage people to do business with a critical thinking mind. The presentation from E Mandelize of CLEAR-AA stood out the most- I loved her preparedness and clarity.

The welcome function and awards were also refreshing, with the dancing YEEs – I even joined in the dancing and selfie taking.

The second day of conference I attended the Roundtable Session 1 for capacitating Emerging evaluators. I was glad to learn that there's a "family" chain that is well coordinated already existing so that we (YEEs) don't find ourselves having to register for more than one organization/association. The possibility of going far without much financial spend became apparent and I will continue to join and attend

webinars and read more about my M&E interests. I didn't quite get clarity on how one can find an alignment of courses according to one's background and also if the aim of all the associations involved is to take end up as professional statutory bodies – this was one of the suggestions my group gave out. I'm hoping that solutions like using google play/books) and other similar e-libraries(safarionline) can be used collectively since I saw some valuable books but they may be costing around R1000.00 which can a lot for one person; but collectively, it would work great. It was in the last session(strand 2) that I really felt free to link my past to my future in M&E, I not only supported my fellow YEEs(Geeta & Takalani), but felt I gained tools and information I can readily use in my workplace(the social network analysis) as it can improve my change management work. Sara reminded me of my cartography days with her visual enlightenments.

On Friday, I managed to attend 2 strands (1 and 3), where another YEE was on the podium. I wish to have been able to have gotten a systems-thinking view of M&E; but understand that the presenter canceled.

In general, I've learnt not to undermine my past, seeing that there were a lot of different people from differing backgrounds (just like me). It was a big relief to find people without a linear career past and it made feel at home. I gained a lot more than I lost (my phone).

I wish that the next conference there's double the scholarship available, and also that the criteria can differ somehow according to context of challenges faced by entrants. I will forever be grateful to SAMEA for doing this in my circumstance and not allowing my lack of safe & reliable transport to impede my way ahead and I will not disappoint, It's made even more eager to serve the M&E community.