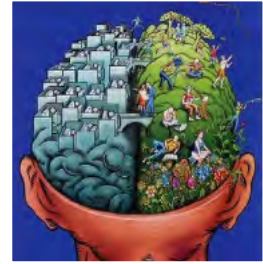# Academic Networking

Dr Tseen Khoo and Jonathan O'Donnell
Research Whisperer
15 June 2022

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Networking in academia can lead to more successful research collaborations, more career opportunities, and better profile for your work. But what happens when none of the traditional ways of networking appeal to you? What happens if they are no longer available because conferences and seminars have moved online? What if those modes have actively put you off getting out there and doing any networking at all?

We offer practical strategies for building a network from the base that you already have, in ways that you are comfortable with. It addresses the different ways that networking can happen. It provides networking ideas that are based on trust and reciprocity, that aren't limited by the university, city, or country where you are based. It's ideal for those of you who hear the word 'networking' and cringe.

About the authors

Dr Tseen Khoo is a Senior Lecturer in the Research Education and Development team, Graduate Research School, La Trobe University. She's been a Senior Advisor (Research Grant Development) at RMIT University, and a research fellow at Monash University and the University of Queensland. She has written on research funding issues, early career researcher experiences, alternative academic streams, and racial diversity issues in Australia. Tseen is the founding convenor of the Asian Australian Studies Research Network (AASRN; 2006-2017), and a founding editorial advisor for the Asian Australian arts and culture magazine, Peril (2006-2013). Her ORCID is 0000-0002-5447-061X.

Jonathan O'Donnell helps people get funding for their research. To be specific, he helps the people in the Faculty of Science at the University of Melbourne (all views his own). He has been doing that, on and off, since the 1990's (with varying degrees of success). He loves his job. He loves it so much that he has enrolled in a PhD to look at crowdfunding for research.

Since 2011, Tseen and Jonathan created and have been managing the **Research Whisperer** blog, Twitter stream and Facebook page. The Research Whisperer is dedicated to the topic of doing research in academia. They talk about finding funding, research culture, and building academic track-records. They have been quietly successful in their endeavours. The blog attracts over 250,000 views per year, from over 150,000 visitors, and the Research Whisperer Twitter account has over 50,000 followers.

- [Research Whisperer](#) blog.
- [@ResearchWhisper](#) on Twitter.
- [Research Whisperer](#) on Facebook.

Contents

Mythologies of networking

We are often told that networking is about:

- Cold-calling a room.
- Focusing on what you want.
- Aiming for immediate value.

We don't think that is true. More importantly, we feel that this actively turns people away from making connections with others.

What is networking? We believe that networking is about building communities and connections based on trust. Everybody already has a number of networks (or communities) that they are a part of (e.g. family, friends, workmates) and have the skills that are needed to build on this in a manner that suits their personality and their preferences.

Your role within your existing networks

The is King Oscar II of Sweden and his family in 1905. European royalty built connections with other royal families through family links. While very few of us have families like Oscar II (and some have no families at all), families provide a useful way to think about networks.

What is your role within your family? Parents have different roles to children, and the eldest child often has a different role to the youngest child. Roles change over time, as we grow from children to adults. We become less reliant on that network as we build new connections outside the family. Yet we usually retain strong connections back to our family, even if we become parents and build our own family.

What do you contribute?

What do you contribute to your family? A baby contributes almost nothing in material terms, yet it often is the most loved member of the family. As you grow, your capacity to contribute grows. For any network or community, it is really important to understand what you can contribute. Networks and communities grow stronger as more people contribute. If not enough people contribute, they will fail.

What do you gain?

What do you gain from the network? Most communities have a purpose. Being a member of the community brings with it certain responsibilities, and provides other benefits. There needs to be a balance between the two.

How do you sustain or build the network?

What might you do to sustain or build the network? Active community members help the network to grow stronger. One simple way to sustain a network is to invite others to join.

What networks do you already have?
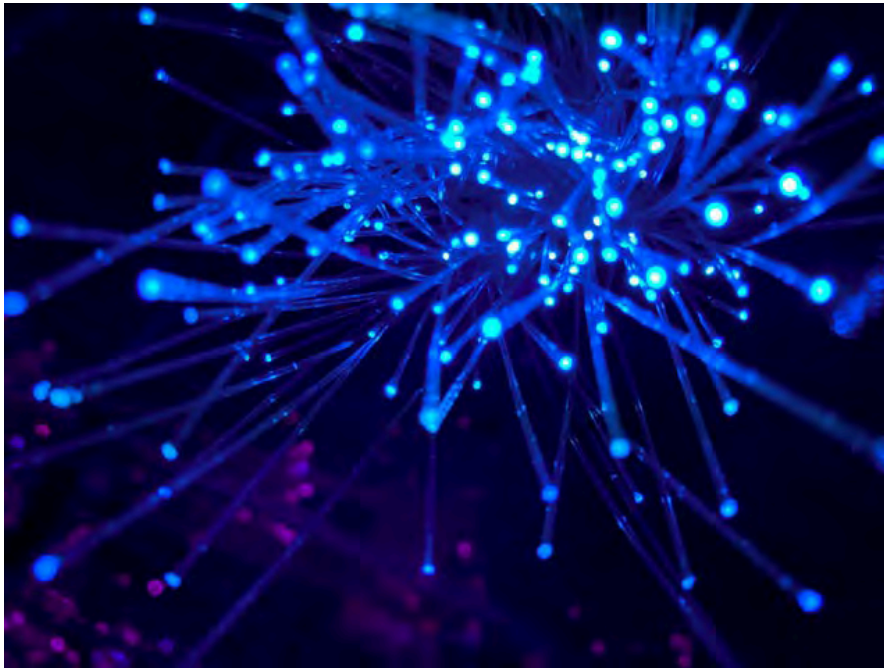
Besides family, it is helpful to think about what communities, what networks we are already a part of.

Friends and colleagues

We often have different groups of friends, from school, from university and from shared interests. Sport, for example, provides a shared interest that can create strong friendship bonds.

We might have different friends off-line and on-line, particularly if we spend time gaming online or are active on social media.

We have colleagues at work, and often keep in touch as we move from job to job. We can have different networks in different countries, if we have spent significant time in other countries, for university or for work.

Weaving a path

We often move between these communities relatively seamlessly. We meet new friends through other friends. We build relationships with people at work, and welcome new colleagues.

While there can be ruptures and difficult times sometimes, for the most part we don't have much difficulty weaving our path through these communities, in part because we generally understand how they work. We understand our role, our responsibilities, what we gain from the group, and what we can contribute. These are the skills you need to build, or join, new groups.

Good citizenship

Good citizenship in a network comes from understanding both the responsibilities and the benefits of being a member. Being a member of a network is important not just because of what we gain from it, but from what we give to it.

We behave differently when we are with different communities (e.g. personal, professional and academic). However, there are some general roles that are common to all networks.

- Sustaining the community.
- Taking an active role.
- Helping it to grow.

Leading versus joining

Advice for post-graduate students and early career academics often encourages people to take up leadership roles. However, we can't lead all the time. Besides being exhausting, we don't have the skills or the interest to lead in every network. That's OK. We need to make space for others, and one way to do that is to follow their lead.

These things aren't eternal

Networks and communities have different lifespans. Just as our roles within communities change over time, the communities themselves change over time. We work to sustain them and help them grow when we see value in them. If we don't see value, we might not contribute as much. If enough people do that, the network won't grow. Over time, it may fade away.

Sometimes networks and communities finish with a bang. Major tensions between key people, or strong differences of opinions can cause communities to break apart. Sometimes these form new, smaller communities. At other times, things wither away.

Sometimes networks end before we are ready for them to end. It can be confusing and painful to watch a community that you value fade away or break apart. It can feel like you are putting a lot in, but not getting much back. Our only advice is to talk to others in the group about the problem. Sometimes people don't realise what is happening, or don't understand what they can do to help.

Online communities

Jonathan loves this image. It shows a group of librarians from World of Warcraft. It isn't clear from the context whether these are real-life librarians who play World of Warcraft, or World of Warcraft players who take care of libraries in the game (or both). These people have built a community in a game that wasn't really designed with librarians in mind.

For some people, making connections online is easier than making connections face to face. Tseen prefers connecting with people via social media. Being at one remove provides her with a comfortable measure of control. She found COVID lockdowns relatively pain-free.

Jonathan prefers connecting face to face. A large part of his work is having coffee with academics to talk about funding their research, and with other administrators across the university. He prefers a personal connection in real life. He found COVID lockdowns lonely.

In 2014, Tseen and our colleague Inger Mewburn (who is much more extroverted than Tseen) both attended the same conference. Afterwards, Tseen compared her experience with Inger. They had very different approaches. While both met people at the conference, Tseen preferred to stick with one or two well-known friends, while Inger was connecting with a much larger group. While Tseen controlled the number of social functions she attended, Inger preferred to attend them all. At the end of a conference, Tseen said that she was "...usually happy to make goodbyes and steal off alone" while Inger was "completely drained of energy and exhausted, but happy".

- Khoo, Tseen. 2014. 'It's Not You, It's Me'. *The Research Whisperer* (blog). 12 May 2014.

If you are relatively introverted, you may be more comfortable joining online communities. They may be less draining than face-to-face networking as:

- You can contribute when you want, on your own terms.
- You are at a remove, so can't get stuck in awkward conversations.
- Can block people who are persistently annoying or aggressive.

It also allows you to find people who have similar interests to you, unrestricted by geography.

Building communities

Sometimes there isn't a community or network that suits your needs. You might need to create one. This is the situation that Tseen faced during her PhD. She was the founding convener of the Asian Australian Studies Research Network (AASRN), a network for academics, community researchers, and cultural workers who are interested in the area of Asian Australian Studies.

Being proactive can be big, or it can be quite small. It may be as simple as bringing together a small group of colleagues or friends who share the same interest, or have the same problem. It might be as simple as setting up a Shut Up and Write group (in a café or online), so that you and your colleagues have dedicated time for writing.

You might choose to put some time into building a personal learning network (PLN). A personal learning network is a group of colleagues who support one another or, as Lauren Forner writes "…friends with whom who share goals, ideas, and often jokes."[1] It provides a supportive environment when you can ask, and answer, questions with colleagues that you trust.

The key is knowing what might work best for you and being willing to experiment. If you try something and it feels like it is working, it is probably worth pursuing it. In general, it is easier to start things with a friend. Like going to the gym, having someone with you makes it easier to keep going.

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[1] Forner, Lauren. 2012. 'A PLN: Friends…with Benefits'. *Chat with Rellypops* (blog). 8 January 2012.

Further reading

This talk builds on what we've published on the Research Whisperer over the last ten years.

- Kelly, Wade. 'Forging Your Post-PhD, during Your PhD'. *The Research Whisperer* (blog), 25 November 2019.
  Wade provides an extrovert's view of building links and making your way.
- Tseen Khoo wrote the two posts that form the core of this talk, seven years apart.
  - 'Networking That Works'. *The Research Whisperer* (blog), 24 September 2018.
  - 'Networking and Other Academic Hobbies'. *The Research Whisperer* (blog), 13 June 2011.
- Khoo, Tseen. 2014. 'It's Not You, It's Me'. *The Research Whisperer* (blog). 12 May 2014.
  Tseen and Inger Mewburn wrote about how introverts and extroverts differ when networking at conferences.
- Tan, Linus. 'Treating Networking like a Research Project'. *The Research Whisperer* (blog), 8 March 2021.
  Linus reminds us that we are researchers, so we can do some background work.
- Ngo, May. 'When You Can't Always Get What You Need'. *The Research Whisperer* (blog), 14 September 2015.
  May points out that narratives of the 'hope economy' reinforce privilege. Be careful.

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