

The Dahlem Workshops



History

During the last half of the twentieth century, specialization in science greatly increased in response to advances achieved in technology and methodology. This trend, although positive in many respects, created barriers between disciplines and could have inhibited progress if left unchecked. Understanding the concepts and methodologies of related disciplines became a necessity. Reuniting the disciplines to obtain a broader view of an issue became imperative, for problems rarely fall conveniently into the purview of a single scientific area. Interdisciplinary communication and innovative problem solving within a conducive environment were perceived as integral yet lacking to this process.

In 1971, an initiative to create such an environment began within Germany's scientific community. In discussions between the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Science Foundation) and the *Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft* (Association for the Promotion of Science Research in Germany), researchers were consulted to compare the needs of the scientific community with existing approaches. It became apparent that something new was required: an approach that began with state-of-the-art knowledge and proceeded onward to challenge the boundaries of current understanding; a form truly interdisciplinary in its problem-solving approach.

As a result, the *Stifterverband* established *Dahlem Konferenzen* (the Dahlem Workshops) in cooperation with the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* in 1974. Silke Bernhard, formerly associated with the Schering Symposia, was

Figure adapted from *L'Atmosphère: Météorologie Populaire*, Camille Flammarion. Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie., 1888.

engaged to lead the conference team and was instrumental in implementing this unique approach.

The Dahlem Workshops take their name from a district of Berlin known for its strong historic connections to science. In the early 1900s, Dahlem was the seat of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes where, for example, Albert Einstein, Lise Meitner, Fritz Haber, and Otto Hahn conducted their research. Today the district is home to several Max Planck Institutes, the *Freie Universität Berlin*, the *Wissenschaftskolleg*, and the Konrad Zuse Center.

In its formative years, the Dahlem Workshops evolved in response to the needs of science. They soon became firmly embedded within the international scientific community and were recognized as an indispensable tool for advancement in research. To secure its long-term institutional stability, *Dahlem Konferenzen* was integrated into the *Freie Universität Berlin* in 1990.

Aim

The aim of the Dahlem Workshops is to promote an international, interdisciplinary exchange of scientific information and ideas, to stimulate international cooperation in research, and to develop and test new models conducive to more effective communication between scientists.

Concept

The Dahlem Workshops were conceived to be more than just another a conference venue. Anchored within the philosophy of scientific enquiry, the Dahlem Workshops represent an independently driven quest for knowledge: one created, nurtured, and carefully guided by representatives of the scientific community itself. Each Dahlem Workshop is an interdisciplinary communication process aimed at expanding the boundaries of current knowledge. This dynamic process, which spans more than two years, gives researchers the opportunity to address problems that are of high-priority interest, in an effort to identify gaps in knowledge, to pose questions aimed at directing future inquiry, and to suggest innovative ways of approaching controversial issues. The overall goal is not necessarily to exact consensus but to search for new perspectives, for these will help direct the international research agenda.

Governance

The Dahlem Workshops are guided by the Scientific Advisory Board, composed of representatives from the international scientific community. The board is responsible for the scientific content and future directions of the Dahlem Workshops and meets biannually to review and approve all workshop proposals.

Workshop Topics

Workshop topics are problem-oriented, interdisciplinary by nature, of high-priority interest to the disciplines involved, and timely to the advancement of science. Scientists who submit workshop proposals, and chair the workshops, are internationally recognized experts active in their field.

Program Advisory Committee

Once a proposal has been approved, a Program Advisory Committee is formed for each workshop. Composed of 6–7 scientists representing the various scientific disciplines involved, the committee meets approximately one year before the Dahlem Workshop to develop the scientific program of the meeting. The committee selects the invitees, determines the topics that will be covered by the pre-workshop papers, and assigns each participant a specific role. Participants are invited on the basis of their international scientific reputation alone. The integration of young German scientists is promoted through special invitations.

Dahlem Workshop Model

A Dahlem Workshop can best be envisioned as a week-long intellectual retreat. Participation is strictly limited to forty participants to optimize the interaction and communication process.

Participants work in four interdisciplinary discussion groups, each organized around one of four key questions. There are no lectures or formal presentations at a Dahlem Workshop. Instead, concentrated discussion — within and between groups — is the means by which maximum communication is achieved.

To enable such an exchange, participants must come prepared to the workshop. This is facilitated through a carefully coordinated pre-workshop dialog: Discussion themes are presented through “background papers,” which review a particular aspect of the group’s topic and introduce controversies as well as unresolved problem areas for discussion. These papers are circulated in advance, and everyone is requested to submit comments and questions, which are then compiled and distributed. By the time everyone arrives in Berlin, issues have been presented, questions have been raised, and the Dahlem Workshop is ready to start.

Discussion takes place in moderated sessions as well as through informal interactions. Cross-fertilization between groups is both stressed and encouraged. By the end of the week, through a collective effort directed by a rapporteur, each group has prepared a draft report of the ideas, opinions, and contentious issues raised by the group. Directions for future research are highlighted, as are problem areas still in need of resolution. On the final day, the results of the draft reports are discussed in a plenary session, to which colleagues from the Berlin–Brandenburg area are invited.

Dahlem Workshop Reports

After the workshop, attention is directed toward the necessity of communicating the results of the workshop to a wider audience. A two-tier review process guides the revision of the background papers, and discussion continues to finalize the group reports. The chapters are carefully edited to highlight the perspectives, controversies, gaps in knowledge, and proposed research directions.

The publication of the workshop results in book form completes the process of a Dahlem Workshop, as it turns over the insights gained to the broad scientific community for consideration and implementation. Each volume in the Dahlem Workshop Report series contains the revised background papers and group reports as well as an introduction to the workshop themes. The series is published in partnership with The MIT Press.

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