

ELAVIO 2016

a personal report

Hans Degroote

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It is rare for an e-mail to make me smile, but that is exactly what the mail informing me I had obtained the combined EURO-IFORS grant to attend ELAVIO, the Latin-American summer school in operational research, did: put a big smile on my face and initiate the most-pleasant thought of “I am going to Colombia, I am going to Cali in Colombia, I will visit the continent of my most distant dreams”.

I owe this smile and many more that followed to five interleaved organisations. Closest to home I owe gratitude to ORBEL, the Belgian Operational Research Society, for accepting my application and forwarding it to EURO, the Association of European Operational Research Societies. It is to EURO that I feel most grateful. They awarded me and Andres Osorio, esteemed colleague from the university of Southampton, a grant covering transportation costs to and from Cali. Thank you EURO for this generous grant, the faith it shows and the priceless experience it sparked.

Rising above continents encounters IFORS, the International Federation of Operational Research Societies, who helped sponsor the attendance of 40 ELAVIO-attendees, including my own.

Zooming in into another continent brings ALIO into focus. ALIO is the Latino-Iberoamerican Association of Operational Research. Note the ibero in the name: I have not yet left Europe behind completely, Spain and Portugal are still with me. It is out of ALIO’s commitment to interchanging information and experience that ELAVIO grew.

The final link from application e-mail sent as distant dream to tangible Colombian reality is ASOCIO, the Colombian Society of Operational Research, whose members organised this year’s edition and did so splendidly.

Many thanks to ORBEL, EURO, IFORS, ALIO and ASOCIO for granting me the opportunity to attend ELAVIO 2016.

Going in I had not envisioned I was about to face the most intellectually challenging week of my life so far. There was the obvious challenge of the courses. Covering a wide array of subjects the school still succeeded in presenting a sense-making whole rising above its individual parts. Exact methods were brought to us by Prof. Dr. Alejandro Crema while metaheuristics were presented by Prof. Dr. Rodrigo Linfati. Completing the methodological trifecta was a course on stochastic modelling by Prof. Dr. Raha Akhavan Tabatabaei.

The other half of courses was motivated more by application. Metaheuristics were successfully applied to logistics by Prof. Dr. José Luis Gonzalez Velarde and the optimisation underlying data-visualisation was brought into the open by Prof. Dr. Emilio Carrizosa Priego, Spanish representative of the Iberian I in ELAVIO and most generous with his advice, of scientific nature and on life in general. In the sixth main course the facility location problem was discussed in depth by Prof. Dr. Juan Guillermo Villegas.

As a bonus we were treated to a talk by Prof. Dr. Valentina Gutiérrez who made us realise clearly how OR is making the world a healthier place by discussing solved and current challenges all over the medical services supply chain in Colombia. Twice as nice when you realise your promoter helped inspire some of the work you see so far away from home, as I had been told the evening before while enjoying Cali's scenery from the pleasant confines of the ELAVIO party-bus.

Yes, the courses were challenging in content, but what I had underestimated was the challenge in their form. Four of six were taught in Spanish, a language still quite recent in my mind. A conscious effort was required not only to understand the high-level material but also to process the language in which it was presented.

Counterintuitively as it may seem even the breaks were taxing mentally as Spanish was small-talk language of choice for all except Brazilians, and my Portuguese had unfortunately rusted beneath layers of Spanish learned since leaving Lisbon, my Erasmus destination a few years ago.

Let it be said that the combined mental challenge was faced with much(o) gusto and that it made me a stronger scientist and person as a whole. My OR knowledge has deepened and widened, my Spanish has improved a mountain and I have extended my network of friends and colleagues with a major transatlantic link.

ELAVIO is structured in such a way as to maximally promote the formation of friendships and collaborations. From breakfast until bedtime everyone is always together. All three meals are taken together and at night people relax on the outside terrace or go out together. This builds companionship and friendship. The seeds of scientific collaborations planted during parallel session in which each participant of ELAVIO presents his research are watered with coffee over breaks. I cannot imagine a better structure for a summer school.

Considering the high level of research displayed all around me, senior academic staff as well as students, reading in a booklet that Colombia awarded a total of 16 Phd's in 2013 surprised me. I don't know the causes for this low number but I do believe the Colombian OR-field will help greatly raise this number over the years to come.

I'd gladly share much more as I enjoy talking about positive experiences that made me grow, but already I have talked a lot and that in one-way written fashion. I welcome all mails with thoughts and questions on hans.degroote@kuleuven.be and hans.degroote2@gmail.com and hope to welcome those present at ELAVIO sometime smiling warmly into Europe.

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