

Working with Ant Whitworth

Simon Goodwin

Abstract A short tribute about working with Ant Whitworth.

This conference was held as a tribute to Ant Whitworth and his work in all sorts of areas associated with star formation. Many people at the conference have known Ant for many years, and some will have met him for the first time at the meeting. But quite a few of the people at the conference have had the pleasure of working directly with Ant as a PhD student, postdoc, or a fellow of some description.

Here I present a personal view of what I have learnt from Ant about how to do astronomy, although I am sure (and hope) that much of it is not unique to Ant.

The first, and most obvious, lesson is to try as hard as possible to be correct in what you do. If you lay-out your starting point and assumptions then hopefully everything that follows in your work is correct given that starting-point. The point of laying-out your assumptions clearly is that in theory they are almost certainly wrong. Wrong in that they will not exactly match reality and will ignore various physics you know to be important. One thing that can be guaranteed with absolute certainty is that no star formation simulation has ever had the right initial conditions, or included all of the important physics. But we can still make progress, and we can still gain huge insights into reality, as long as we remember this.

The second important lesson is to be extremely careful when writing-up your research. I learnt from Ant to read every word, in every sentence, in every paragraph carefully. Does it say what I mean it to say? Does it inform the reader? Is it grammatically correct in the most painstakingly anal way possible? Write, read,

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re-write, then re-read, then re-write again. Then get comments from Ant and re-write from scratch. At first a horribly painful process, but one that gets ingrained (just ask my students).

It is also important not to get too attached to your own ideas and theories. They are almost certainly wrong (or at best, not completely right). If you are lucky you are the one to show that you are wrong, but probably it will be somebody else. . . and be ready to change your mind when observations finally destroy your wonderful theory.

The final, and by far the most important, thing I learnt from Ant was to have fun. Doing astronomy should be enjoyable. It shouldn't involve heated arguments, but friendly exchanges of views. The point is to enjoy trying to get at some of the deep mysteries of the Universe, and make lots of good friends along the way. And if you're lucky, to get to go to lots of fantastic conferences like this.

On behalf of everybody who has been a student, postdoc, or whatever with Ant I would like to thank him for making the whole process so enjoyable and enriching, both scientifically and personally. The large number of us who wanted to come to this conference and thank Ant in person speaks volumes for his influence on us. And long may it continue.

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