

2013



Our activities in a nutshell



Principiæ
Structuring thoughts

HECTIC BUT FULFILLING: this is how the two of us would describe our year 2013—very much in line with our previous seven years at Principiæ, really. We continued work for a growing base of returning clients, added a record number of campuses to our speaking tours worldwide, and considerably extended the range of themes we discuss in our lectures, workshops, and training programs. Along the way, we placed several additional resources online (free for all): videos of Jean-luc’s talks, articles, handouts, etc.

For critical thinkers such as us who like to question things (including our own assumptions), 2013 also nicely confirmed the high value we add—in absolute terms and for the price we ask. We successfully went through large-scale competitive bidding processes for Belgian universities, and we receive ever more thank-you notes from participants in our sessions who credit us for their subsequent successes, notably grants, awards for best paper, talk, or poster, and decisive job talks.

In 2014, we will continue our “crusade to change the world,” by questioning ineffective approaches rooted in traditions and proposing no-nonsense, directly applicable alternatives. To this end, we strive to reach the highest number of people in an efficient way, among others with our speaking tours and open sessions, and we look forward to seeing you (again), together with your friends, colleagues, students ... and more!

Geneviève *Jean-luc*
Geneviève CASTERMAN Jean-luc DOUMONT

More trips, more campuses, more themes

Personal efficiency is one of several new themes we added to our menu in 2013. You can download our matching article in *Optics and Photonics News* from the page of online resources for our sessions (www.principiae.be/lectures). We now look forward to lecturing more frequently on these new themes and to adding others, should the opportunity arise.



Our year in a nutshell? More, more, more. More trips abroad, more campuses as part of these trips, too, notably top-notch universities and research institutes in the United States, and more themes for our sessions on communication and beyond.

In 2013, our activities overseas were focused on the Americas, with one short trip to Mexico, two to Canada, three to Chile (each trip one week or longer), and six to the United States, for a total of 104 days spent in the New World. In contrast, shorter trips to France, Germany, Scotland, and Switzerland hardly felt like traveling at all. (The world is getting smaller.)

Our trips abroad resulted from a steady flow of invitations (more than we could accept, alas) from both regular clients and some twenty new ones. Among these, we got to speak at U Ottawa, U Waterloo, and *École de technologie supérieure* in Canada, and at Cornell U, Purdue U, Tufts U, U Michigan, and U Illinois at Urbana Champaign in the US, to name a few. In Europe, we spoke on such campuses as *École polytechnique* in the Paris area, Heriot-Watt U in Edinburgh, and ETH in Zurich.

Also, we were delighted to be invited to address audiences on an even broader range of themes in 2013. What we regard as the three pillars of communication—written documents, oral presentations, and graphs—were much demanded still (and our expertise with them is second to none at this point), but we also got the opportunity to discuss different themes that are equally dear to our heart, such as personal efficiency, resistance to change, and all the way to gender stereotypes and work-life balance. Jean-luc was even asked twice to give a talk about his career, a sure sign that he must be getting old. ;-)

A confirmation of the value we add

The many success stories that attendees later share with us are a wonderful confirmation of the relevance and effectiveness of our recommendations. Below are a few recent ones. We look forward to hearing yours!

[Sydney] *Zonet heb ik de best paper/presentation award ontvangen met expliciete referentie naar de kwaliteit van de presentatie. Zonder jouw schitterende training was dit nooit mogelijk geweest en bijgevolg kan ik maar één ding zeggen: dank u!* [PhD student in Belgium](#)

I wanted to thank you for helping me get a faculty job. Your advice on graph making and data presentation was invaluable, and as a result, my job talk was top-notch. I ... even had a few people say it was the "best seminar of the year." Only half of it was my data, really—I credit the other half to you. [MIT postdoc \(now CMU faculty\)](#)

You saved my talk! — ... a colleague of mine told the audience about your seminars, including your advice that a prepared speaker should be able to give their talk without slides. After a slight pause, I gathered my wits, delivered my talk (...), and received a standing ovation. [Faculty at BCM \(whose computer died—early in her talk\)](#)

Besides traveling the world, we have our hands full with clients in Belgium, where we more often run full-fledged programs, with homework assignments, practice sessions, and so on. Twenty thirteen brought formal confirmation of the value added by our programs; it was a year of anniversaries, too.

Two Belgian universities, including one at which we had run some 25 full courses already, reconsidered all contractors for training services through a competitive bidding process. We are delighted to report that we were selected once again as the best option for scientific communication and graphs. We certainly do not claim to be the cheapest, but we have reasons to believe we offer the highest quality-to-price ratio, and this selection process came as a nice confirmation of it.

PhD students and postdocs make the bulk of our audiences, yet resistance to change comes mostly from their supervisors. In 2013, one Belgian university heard our plea and let us run a session specifically for PhD advisors. It was well received (two faculty even asked to be allowed to take the full course, together with students), so we hope to repeat the experience.

Running sessions worldwide on an increasingly broad variety of topics and for diverse audiences is a demanding occupation, of course, but the intensity and the diversity of it help build a solid experience. Jean-luc started teaching speaking in 1989 and made it a full-time job to deliver such sessions in 1993, so we could celebrate 20 years of hard work in 2013, as well as look forward to our next 20 years of activities. Moreover, our book *Trees, maps, and theorems* came out five years ago and gets nothing but praise—another anniversary to celebrate. :-)

Why on Earth don't you hire?

Every time we regretfully have to say *no* to a client because of previous commitments, we must face this question: "With all the demand you get, you're overworked. Why don't you hire someone to help?" We ponder it periodically, in fact, but have at least three reasons for going on with just the two of us.

First, when clients ask why we do not hire, we ask them whether they would have settled for a new hire instead of us. That's when they go, "No, no, I mean, you should hire someone to serve your other clients, so you'd have more time for us yourselves." Right. People come to us for who we are: this simple truth is our greatest strength and our greatest weakness. In a sense, we have the business model of an artist.

Many people are prompt to add we should get help for nonessential tasks—those we could delegate to, say, an admin assistant. Those tasks are very few. Clients expect every e-mail we send to be a model of the principles we teach. And prospects appreciate discussing training sessions with the very people who will be running them, not with an intermediary. The same goes for attendees asking a follow-up question: they want to talk directly to the experts.

Finally, we are in this business to help individuals, not to manage a team of people who would do so. We want to be in the auditoriums and classrooms, not (or not only) in our offices. We believe in close, long-term collaborations with our clients: we want to hear about their needs and constraints ourselves, to find solutions together, and to follow up firsthand.

Are you focusing on universities?

We work with a broad variety of clients—companies, universities, nonprofit organizations, governmental agencies, learned societies, etc.—but yes, the share of academic and research institutions has grown considerably over the last twenty years to become the largest one today. We see three reasons for it.

Over the last twenty years, universities worldwide have increasingly realized the need for professional development, especially at the (post)doctoral level, and have come to regard it as their responsibility to address this need, through sessions developed and run by external instructors such as ourselves.

Universities moreover have a much higher turnover than most companies. Hence, training programs need to be repeated at a much higher frequency. Some of our satisfied business clients may not call upon us for several years, simply because they did not hire significantly. In contrast, some universities ask us to run three or four editions of a program each year to train a whole lot of new PhD students.

Last but not least, we are well positioned to train researchers in academia and beyond. Participants in our programs often comment that we are "one of them" because of our degrees, our experience in and out of academia, and our rational approach.

As a side note, our activities for companies are also far less visible: no open lectures to start with, and sometimes nondisclosure agreements that prevent us from even listing a given company as our client.

Why do you travel so much?

Friends and clients alike often wonder why we go and run sessions in so many places on the planet. Some hypothesize that there isn't enough business for us in Belgium alone; others simply recommend that we do more from home, through teleseminars of one form or another. Traveling can be exhausting and is not overly compatible with family life indeed, but we believe it is a crucial part of our approach.

In our case, traveling is a choice. As mentioned elsewhere in this activity report, we have our hands full already with requests from clients in Belgium. Still, we see no reason a priori to exclude people in need of our expertise elsewhere on the planet.

Addressing a large variety of audiences in terms of background, age, and nationality also forces us to challenge what we teach, put it in perspective, redefine the foundations of it. We feel it broadens and deepens both our expertise in a subject matter and our effectiveness when helping other people—good for us and ultimately good for our audiences.

Above all else, though, we believe in the impact of physical togetherness on the learning process and in the power of group learning. Teleseminars and other forms of distance education are better than nothing for sure, but simply do not compare to direct, in-person confrontation with an instructor and with other learners in conceptual discussion and practice sessions—ideally even in the learners usual "biotope," for better transfer of competences learned. So, yes, we will keep traveling the world!