

Love thy neighbour

Collaborations in research often span the globe. But the partner of your dreams might be just around the corner — try scientific ‘speed-dating’ and find out.

To define love is probably impossible. But finding love is a process that’s easy to describe: it’s stochastic, a random walk; try many, and you will find the right one. That, of course, may take quite some time, so the trick is to identify the most fruitful area to search. When it comes to finding partners for scientific collaboration, researchers may be tempted to only ‘think global’. But now some universities have instigated a match-making scheme — scientific speed-dating, if you will — to encourage their staff to seek out more local, and more unusual, collaborations.

Across many fields these days, there is a common pattern of shared facilities and expertise, and (not least) shared funding for multinational collaborations. Economically, and in terms of efficiency, it does make great sense. But it’s likely that the network of scientists supporting such collaborations evolves only slowly: how many of the same faces do you meet, again and again, during your annual travel schedule? Wonderful as it is to cultivate enduring friendships, how many surprises, or truly groundbreaking ideas, come out of meetings among the usual gang of fellow specialists?

Chatting to a researcher from a completely different field might well be more fruitful, and certainly less predictable in outcome. And such ‘beautiful strangers’ are likely to be close at hand: within any university there is broad opportunity to share information and pool resources with others from a variety of disciplines, and often the most unlikely mixes are the most interesting. But first, contact must be established, and, like the dating game, beginnings can be difficult.

But universities and institutions are helping to catalyse the process, by

increasing the pace of the random walk and bringing together people who work, if not next door then in the next building — not unlike the matching of lonely hearts. A little more than a year ago, for example, University College London (UCL) held a ‘speed-dating’ event. Researchers from a variety of research backgrounds — arts and humanities as well as science — were given eight minutes to talk to another researcher about their work, for interest’s sake and to explore the potential for collaboration; at the end of the eight-minute slot, the blow of a whistle signalled time to move on to the next candidate. Tantalizingly advertised with slogans such as “You only love me for my brain” and “Talk about the Big Bang on your first date”, the event was deemed to have been a success. Other universities are exploring the same approach, and, funnily enough, 14 February — Valentine’s Day — seems to be a preferred date for such events.

The speed-dating format, with the purpose of introducing scientists to strangers, has also been extended to other avenues. In February 2006, for example, the Wellcome Trust played matchmaker between the scientists it funds and a group of TV producers, with the scientists having five-minute slots to tell and sell their stories. At the University of Bath, a student business competition is underway,

which kicked off with a speed-dating session to match students with local business experts who would mentor them through the contest.

If, after all, you are too shy to speed-date, then social networking on the web could be for you. Later this month, the Nature Publishing Group is launching *Nature Networks*, a global social networking platform (<http://network.nature.com>) on which you will be able to hold discussions, join groups, tag content and blog. But *Nature Networks* isn’t only about virtual connections and global communication. Last year, a precursory local-community website went live: *Nature Network Boston* (<http://network.nature.com/boston>) features science news, events and jobs in the Boston area, as well as blogs and discussion groups for local scientists. *Nature Network London* will follow this spring. Once again, it’s an opportunity to create local interactions and perhaps initiate collaboration.

And who knows where it might lead?

