Integrate and Fire Satellite Symposium

A Trainee-Centered, Discussion-Driven Approach to Interdisciplinary Neuroscience

CAN 2026 Pre-Conference Satellite Event | Montreal, Quebec

Symposium Overview:

The Integrate and Fire Satellite Symposium offers a full-day, trainee-centered event designed to foster genuine interdisciplinary connections among early-career neuroscientists before the main CAN 2026 conference. Participants present their work within thematic sessions organized around big, shared questions in neuroscience, with guided extended discussions that focus each session on genuine dialogue. The event includes an algorithmic speed networking session designed around participants' research abstracts and clustered poster sessions to provide additional structured opportunities for meaningful connections. We aim to provide attendees with an established network of peers going into the main CAN conference, ready to continue their conversations and expand into each other's circles throughout the week. Lunch and coffee provided.

Details:

Academic research has become increasingly specialized, narrowing trainee perspectives toward small academic circles specialized enough to understand them. Yet major scientific problems are inherently interdisciplinary. At conferences, we tend to remain in familiar bubbles: attending talks by the same groups, networking with people we already know, all while missing out on key connections that could reshape our thinking.

Traditional conference formats compound this problem. Talks emphasize methods and results, delivered in specialized language that creates barriers for any neuroscientist outside this knowledge bubble. The spotlight also falls on established PIs rather than trainees who are often closest to the work and its struggles. And networking is left to chance, despite being what trainees consistently rank as their highest priority at conferences.

The **Integrate and Fire Seminar Series**, established in 2022, reimagines scientific discourse with three core principles:

1. **Perspectives over data.** Presentations focus on the story, the big questions, and the shared ideas. We train participants to communicate in a language that fosters collaboration rather than defensiveness and that resonates broadly to researchers in neuroscience; not just their own niche.
2. **Discussion as the main event.** Extended guided Q&A and discussion periods (20-30 minutes per session), encompassing all speakers for a session, make dialogue the centerpiece.
3. **Facilitated networking.** We will use Neuromatch's open-source mind-matching algorithm to cluster participants by research similarity, creating structured opportunities for meaningful connection.

Over three years, we have successfully run nine seminars with students describing them as among the best student-run events in Montreal. Participants consistently praise the welcoming environment that enables trainees to examine their research from broad perspectives and discover overlapping questions with peers they would never otherwise meet.

Proposed Symposium Format:

We propose a full-day satellite event (approximately 6-8 hours) structured around thematic sessions, extended discussions, algorithmic networking, and a “clustered” poster session, described below.

Session Structure

The day will consist of 3-4 thematic sessions, each containing:

- **Thematic introduction (5 minutes):** A brief framing of the session's underlying question, presented in clear (but academic) language, providing context that connects the upcoming speakers. This provides a general background such that speakers can jump straight into their work without repeating introductory concepts.
- **Speaker presentations (3-4 speakers × 5-10 minutes):** Trainee-focused talks emphasizing their unique research perspectives and connections to the main theme rather than methodological detail. A Slido poll is always open for attendees to post (anonymously) and vote on questions in a public board, which will be used to facilitate discussion.
- **Extended discussion (20-30 minutes):** Moderated dialogue exploring connections between presentations and broader implications. Hosts will come prepared with questions but will also use Slido poll questions and interactions with the audience to allow a free-flowing discussion of ideas surrounding the broad themes of the session relevant to neuroscientists. Any leftover Slido questions will be sent to speakers to answer online, and then shared on our website for anyone to review.

Themes

Unlike traditional symposia with predetermined themes, session topics will emerge from participant submissions. Registrants provide research abstracts and keywords, which are processed through Neuromatch's mind-matching algorithm, an open-source tool which has been successfully implemented at other major conferences such as COSYNE, the Vision Sciences Society, and the Cognitive Computational Neuroscience conference. Our organizing team then curates thematic sessions based on the algorithm’s groupings to provide out attendees with connections across otherwise unrelated research areas. This approach ensures themes reflect the actual research landscape of participants rather than imposing predetermined categories that may miss the most interesting intersections.

All research themes will be designed to be maximally relevant to a general academic neuroscience audience (i.e., not overly specialized or technical) to ensure everyone attending will find value in the discussion. You can see examples of past themes we have developed here.

Clustered Poster Session

Participants not selected as speakers will have the chance to present in a novel clustered poster format. Posters are grouped in clusters of 3-4 based on the mind-matching algorithm, so that when presenting, each participant faces 2-3 others working on adjacent problems. This transforms the typically passive "stand and wait" poster experience into immediate, structured networking with relevant peers.

Mind-Matching Speed Networking

Using the research abstracts and keywords submitted during registration, we will run Neuromatch's open-source mind-matching algorithm to pair each attendee with 4-6 other participants whose work is most scientifically complementary to their own. During the speed networking session, participants rotate through a series of timed one-on-one conversations (approximately 8 minutes each) with their algorithmically matched partners. This ensures that every attendee, regardless of how outgoing they are or how well-connected they were when they arrived, leaves with meaningful conversations with peers working on adjacent problems they may never have discovered otherwise, and that they may continue conversing with throughout the conference.

Draft Agenda

Note: Exact timing will be finalized based on registration numbers and session composition.

Time	Activity
8:30 - 9:00	Registration and Welcome (Coffee / Refreshments)
9:00 - 9:15	Opening Remarks: The Integrate and Fire Philosophy
9:15 - 10:30	Session 1: Thematic intro (5 min) + 3-4 speakers (40-50 min) + Discussion (20-30 min)
10:30 - 11:00	Coffee Break
11:15 - 12:30	Session 2: Thematic intro + 3-4 speakers + Discussion
12:30 - 1:45	Lunch + Clustered Poster Session
1:45 - 3:00	Session 3: Thematic intro + 3-4 speakers + Discussion
3:00 - 3:45	Coffee Break + Mind-Matching Speed Networking
3:45 - 4:00	Closing Synthesis / Reflections

Speaker Selection Process

We recognize that CAN typically requests a confirmed speaker list. Our format requires a different approach that we believe better serves the goal of cross-institutional, trainee-centered collaboration:

1. **Open call for abstracts** distributed through CAN channels, institutional neuroscience programs, and our existing networks across Montreal.
2. **Algorithmic clustering** using Neuromatch's mind-matching tool to identify thematic groupings and potential session compositions.
3. **Curatorial selection** by our organizing team (12+ experienced student organizers) to finalize sessions that maximize interdisciplinary dialogue.

4. **Priority for trainees** with attention to institutional diversity, gender balance, and representation of underrepresented groups. The representational criteria will be implemented similarly to CAN's annual Power Pitch sessions, which the main organizer (Zeeshan) hosted last year.

Logistics

- **Date:** Monday, May 18, 2026 (full day, preceding main conference)
- **Location:** University campus venue in Montreal (in discussion with Université de Montréal contacts)
- **Expected attendance:** 50-150 participants
- **Registration fee:** $20-$30 CAD (covers catering; scales with attendance; final price pending funding)
- **Funding:** Institutional funding source secured for core costs; additional support through registration fees and institutional/commercial sponsors in discussion.

Organizing Committee

Primary Organizers:

- Zeeshan Haqqee, Co-Founder, Integrate and Fire Seminar Series (McGill University)
- Peter Fleming, Director, Integrate and Fire Seminar Series (McGill University)
- Lucia Pizzoccaro, Mathias Guayasmin (Université de Montréal)

Organizing Team: Our team consists of students with dedicated roles, such as Content Coordinator, Communications Manager, Seminar Coordinator, Speaker Coordinator, Speaker Advisor, General Secretary, plus additional volunteers from McGill and Université de Montréal.

Institutional Partners: McGill University Integrated Program in Neuroscience; the McGill Graduate Students Association for Neuroscience, l'Association des étudiants en neurosciences de l'Université de Montréal.

Contact Information

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We look forward to bringing this innovative approach to trainee-centered scientific discourse to the Canadian neuroscience community.