

Online Conferencing and Staff Development

Finding time for staff development is always a problem. There are always other, more immediate, demands on the time of a lecturer - preparing classes, giving lectures, marking assignments, etc. Staff development, whilst always – and quite rightly – given a high priority in theory, can often be hard to organise in practice, fitting it around the different demands of timetables, geographical locations, etc. Internal staff development events are often under-attended, or squashed into a day or two at the end of the academic year. External events can be expensive, in time, in finding cover, travelling, accommodation, etc. One partial solution can be using online conferencing for staff development. Online conferencing has tremendous advantages, including time savings and convenience of access. This paper looks at the role of online conferencing in staff development, and is based on our experience of running a number of very successful online conferences and other, online, staff development events.

We're taking a fairly narrow definition here of online conferencing, and saying it is communication which is based around a particular event, which delegates attend, either in real time, or asynchronously. This distinguishes it from other online staff development and support tools, such as, for example, the highly successful mailing list run by Ferl (<http://ferl.becta.org.uk>) for ILT Curriculum Champions in UK Further Education (FE).

In the UK, online conferencing for staff development is still in its infancy. Whilst there are events, they are the exception rather than the rule. We would argue, however, that the scope for online staff development is very considerable indeed, and, over the next few years, will become more and more common. So now we'll look at some of the reasons for this, and examine some examples of real-time and asynchronous staff development events.

Advantages of using online conferencing

Let's start by contrasting online conferences with physical conferences. The overwhelming advantage of a physical conference is simply that it allows better interaction between participants, without external distractions. However, in general, the "better interaction" takes place **outside** the **formal** conference proceedings themselves. Delegates can interact in bars, over meals, in the coffee lounge, etc., so the **informal** part of a physical conference is usually much better (i.e. more interactive) than the **informal** part of an online conference. However, there is much less interaction during the **formal** proceedings of a physical conference, compared with the **formal** part of an **asynchronous** online conference. Why? Partly because there is less time in a physical workshop than in an asynchronous online workshop; and partly because people are much less inclined to contribute in a face to face session than they are online. We have consistently found in our asynchronous online conferences that there is a much higher degree of participation from a much greater number of people than would be found in a physical conference. This means that the online conference can be qualitatively better than the physical equivalent, even if socially it might not be as good (though they can be good socially too)!

This is not necessarily true of real time conferencing, such as web casting using, for example, PowerPoint presentations (see below for examples of this). The interaction here between delegates and presenters is usually no better than in a physical workshop, though there are still the advantages of convenience and long term availability of the proceedings (again, see below).

The other chief advantage of a physical conference, is that once you are there, there are fewer distractions. There's a brick wall between you and the rest of the world, no one can interrupt from outside, especially if you switch off your mobile. You don't get interrupted by people who aren't conference delegates; you can't really answer your email whilst sitting in a workshop; you can't easily get up and walk out! But all these things are possible, even likely, in an online conference, where it is all too easy to be distracted. But this really is a question of your own time and work management – an online conference is not a soft option, which doesn't take much time, it's a real conference which demands a substantial time commitment, and therefore time needs to be set aside for it, and colleagues need to understand that you are attending an important conference, even if it just seems like you're idly sitting at your desk.

Other advantages of online conferences include **cost savings**, which can be very significant indeed. These can be from reduced travel costs, time savings, easier to cover staff, etc. Also, delegate fees are usually substantially less, because there is no need for a physical venue, accommodation, etc.

It's also **convenient** because the conference is available from any internet connected computer; and can often be fitted around other commitments. (But, having said this, it's important not to underestimate the time commitment a successful, busy online conference will require). If it's an asynchronous conference, it's open 24/7, for as long as the event lasts, and participants can log in at their convenience.

Online conferences make it possible for many more people to attend a conference than would be the case physically. As a delegate to one of our conferences said "I would have real problems attending a 'normal' conference due to childcare issues. It also enabled people from much further away to participate". So online conferences are, in practical terms, **more widely available** to a larger number of people. Related to this point is that **online conferences are accessible**. They are wheelchair friendly, it's easy to provide audio or text transcriptions of presentations, screen readers will make the discussions accessible, etc.

Finally, the conference, both real time and asynchronous, can be **permanent**. Even if the conference itself only lasts a few days, the proceedings, including the discussions, can be left available indefinitely, so giving people time to read through discussions again, catch up on what they missed, reflect on what happened, etc.

Examples of real time conferencing

A while ago we ran some experimental web casts, using HorizonLive (<http://www.horizonwimba.com/horizon/>) with Ferl and Leeds College of Technology. This was a series of six PowerPoint presentations with audio, delivered live over the web, and recorded for posterity (see: <http://ferl.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?page=475>). We wanted to see how effective this was as a staff development tool. We did have some problems, almost entirely hardware based. Our skills as sound recording engineers were somewhat lacking, and as you'll see if you view any of the web casts, sound is of variable quality – though mostly quite acceptable, and it got better as we got more experienced. More fundamental was the hardware at the client (participant) end, with both firewalls and bandwidth being an issue for some participants. Firewalls in some organisations had to have a port opened to receive the web cast (easy technically, less easy to organise it at short notice); and pushing live presentations with audio down the web uses a lot of bandwidth, and, given that most colleges had lots of simultaneous users, it was, surprisingly, often better to use a dialup connection, not shared with anyone. However, where users did not have hardware problems, the experience was very positive, especially since they could interact with the presenter. Although not all the interaction functionality was used in these experimental web casts, it includes text, two way

audio, application and whiteboard sharing, etc. Web casts can also be captioned for the hearing impaired.

The potential of this type of tool for staff development is considerable, especially as a body of archived presentations on various topics is developed. Whilst the interaction is, in truth, no more than in a physical workshop, the convenience is a major advantage. For example, one of our web casts was chaired by the author of this paper from a house in Spain; presented by Becta staff located in Coventry; with technical support from staff in Leeds; and participants from all over the UK. Just think of what it would have cost to bring all those people together in one place for a workshop!

Examples of asynchronous conferences

In general, the conferences we have run have been short term (one or two weeks) and very highly structured, with themes, key note presenters, papers, etc. They have also been fee paying, with, typically, a fee of around £50. Fees are charged partly because even online conferences have some costs to set up and run (cost of the environment, presenter fees, etc.); but also because, in general, people appreciate things they pay for more than those they don't, and, perhaps more importantly, charging a fee does force people to think if the conference really is appropriate for their needs, before they sign up for it.

In 2004, we ran the second in our series of conferences aimed at professionals who work in one capacity or another with Deaf people (this does, of course, include many people who are themselves hearing impaired, and the primarily text basis of this conference made it very accessible to them). A particularly noteworthy aspect of this was the international nature of the conference, with over 200 participants from 19 countries over eight days. Feedback, which was almost entirely very positive, included:

"I would do this again in a heartbeat. The level of the discussion and supportive, respectful tone of the comments set it way above many live forums (or online, too) that I have been in".

"I did find the conference very stimulating, and a great way of sharing info and making contacts".

Because the conference had delegates from so many time zones, it was always busy, with people logging in, posting messages, reading the papers, etc.

It would have been impossible, on cost and logistical grounds, to organise such a conference anywhere else other than online.

A more UK-focused example was the VLE online conference in 2004, "Beyond the fringe and into the mainstream". This conference looked at the use of Virtual Learning Environments, and ways to embed them into the teaching and learning practices of colleges and universities. It lasted eight days, and had 260 delegates from all sectors of education. There were 18 workshops, 17 papers and presentations, and 1400 postings. This represents a huge body of content bringing together the knowledge and experience of some of the foremost implementers of VLEs in the UK. Again, feedback was extremely positive, and, again, replicating this conference in a physical context would perhaps have been possible, but very expensive and time consuming.

A demonstration conference, with logins, walk through guided tours, etc., is available at: <http://www.online-conference.net/>

The future

As technology – and, more importantly, bandwidth – improves, the primarily text based presentations will shift to (or be complemented by) PowerPoint with audio, video presentations, British Sign Language signed content, etc. Online conferences aren't going to replace physical conferences. But they will – as so often happens with technology – provide major new opportunities for communication and collaboration, and increase both the quantity and the quality of staff development opportunities available.

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