# Online Conferences and Workshops: Affordable & Ubiquitous Learning Opportunities for Faculty Development

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## Abstract

In today's rapidly changing world of educational technology, faculty and staff struggle to keep up with new developments and the application of these technologies into the teaching and learning environment. Online conferences, workshops, and other events, held on the Internet since 1996, provide ample and affordable opportunities for faculty development to reduce this ambiguity.

Today's online events are held primarily in a synchronous or in an asynchronous mode. They serve as ubiquitous learning opportunities for all participants. They provide content that is generally reflective of current developments in the application of technology for teaching and learning. These high quality events also feature peer-reviewed presentation proposals and paper proceedings.

This paper describes the nature of synchronous online events and in particular, the online conference, how it works and what benefits and disadvantages it brings to its participants. The Teaching, Colleges & Communities (TCC) Worldwide Online Conference will serve as the model for this discussion.

## Keywords

Educational technology, online conferences, opportunities, affordable

## 1. Introduction

The rapid advancement in ICT applications has made it challenging for university faculty and staff to keep up with new educational technology and strategies for implementing them into the teaching and learning environment. They require frequent access to emerging research and best practices in the field (Ho, Kimura, and Narita, 2006), yet the cost and time to travel are often prohibitive. For example, the cost to participate in the Distance Learning and Internet Conference 2008 in Tokyo, Japan will cost approximately $3,000 USD for someone traveling from a mid-western city, USA ($1,600 for airfare, $1,000 for 5 nights of hotel and meals, $300 for conference registration, and $100 for ground transportation). The cost in time to travel to the conference will be between 16 – 18 hours of flight time each way, and a week's absence from work. The $3,000 USD cost is similar for one traveling from Hawaii to attend a conference on the mainland USA (Kimura 2003)

The proliferation of IP and web-based conferencing has made it possible to facilitate professional development and establish learning communities while minimizing travel time and costs (Anderson 1996). The number of online conferences and workshops, such as the Teaching, Colleges & Communities (TCC) Worldwide Online Conference, is gradually increasing. They provide numerous tangible as well as other intangible benefits for faculty and staff. Such benefits include 24/7 ubiquitous access to conference materials over a period of time, no travel costs, greater opportunity to interact directly with presenters, an opportunity to network with other colleagues worldwide, the ability to review all sessions, including those that a participant has missed, in the convenience of the workplace or home. Often, the cost to participants are minimal and generally, much less expensive than traditional face-to-face conferences. Data gathered from evaluation surveys for the TCC Worldwide Online Conference over the past five years clearly substantiate these premises.

This paper describes the nature of synchronous online professional development and in particular, the online conference, how it works and what benefits and disadvantages it brings to its participants. The Teaching, Colleges & Communities (TCC) Worldwide Online Conference will serve as the model for this discussion.

## 2. TCC Worldwide Online Conference

The Technology, Colleges and Community (TCC) Online Conference is a virtual event that allows faculty worldwide to participate in a professional conference at considerable less cost and loss of time from classes. First offered asynchronously via email in 1996, the TCC conference provides opportunities for faculty to network with peers and exchange ideas for research and teaching online.

This online conference has evolved into a scholarly event that follows a real-time schedule of live keynote and paper presentations that begin and end at a prescribed time. The use of Elluminate Live, a virtual classroom tool based on webcasting technology, allows for synchronous presentations that include slide shows, websites, a virtual whiteboard and application sharing.

All live presentations are recorded and archived for later viewing. Concurrent sessions found in typical face-to-face conferences limit what event a participant can normally attend during a given time slot. However, with the playback feature, any or all sessions may be viewed multiple times anytime and from anywhere.

## 3. Data collection & analysis procedures

An online evaluation survey has been implemented as a post conference activity since the outset of the TCC 2006 Worldwide Online Conference. The survey employs a mixed-methods of quantitative and qualitative questions. The evaluation data has been used by conference organizers to decide on how to maintain and improve on the positive experiences of participants.

A few of days after the end of the conference, participants are emailed a link to complete a comprehensive online evaluation survey of the con-ference (portal.coe.hawaii.edu/survey.php?survey=67). For example, the 2008 evaluation survey consisted of 32 statements that required rated responses (excellent to poor), 5-point Likert-type agreement responses (strongly-agree to strongly-disagree), and open-ended responses. Typically, the number of respondents ranged from 10-20% of the total number of participants. Participants were given 7-14 days to complete the evaluation.

A second reminder message to complete the survey was sent out to participants after 2 weeks. Included with the reminder message was an incentive of token "door prizes" for submission along with an email address. Participant email addresses were not associated with their responses. The door prizes consisted of food items from Hawaii (coffee, macadamia nuts & candy) valued at approximately $4-6 (USD). The number of submissions increased by over 100% after the reminder message was sent out.

Raw data was exported from the online survey database into a spreadsheet compatible format for compilation. Most raw data was converted to percentages of positive responses for the Likert-type items.

## 4. Results

The data for 9 survey items is reported in Table 1. What follows is a description for each of the items.

Table 1: TCC Conference Evaluation Survey Data 2004-2008

| Item | Response Type | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. Participants | | 355 | 515 | 650 | 855 | 1088 |
| No. Respondents | | 49 | 94 | 134 | 88 | 208 |
| Content quality | R | NA | 95.1% | 98.5% | 98.8% | 96.4% |
| Conference theme | L | 93.9% | 94.0% | 88.1% | 100.0% | 96.2% |
| Prof dev benefit | L | 93.9% | 95.6% | 91.8% | 97.7% | 93.7% |
| Feeling of belonging to a community | L | 87.8% | 88.1% | 76.1% | 84.1% | 76.3% |
| Interaction with others | L | 93.2% | 90.6% | 81.3% | 87.4% | 81.6% |
| Motivation | C | 8.3% | 17.3% | 18.6% | 27.8% | 28.6% |
| Compared to F2F | L | NA | NA | NA | 78.4% | 68.9% |

Note:
L = Represents a Likert scale, add total of SA and A
R = Represents ratings that include Exc(ellent) & Good; NA omitted, i.e., no rating given
C = check boxes, one of several choices

## 4.1 Number of participants

Over the years, the number of participants is typically in the range of 400-600 participants. Since 2004, it has grown steadily, peaking at over 1000 in 2008. The recent growth is attributable to a single rate that ranges from $500-1500 USD depending on the campus or system enrollment. Additionally, fees for participants from sponsoring organizations are waived. In 2008, for example, there were 375 registrants from Kaplan University (single fee group) and 175 from all campuses of the University of Hawaii (sponsoring organization).

## 4.2 Number of Respondents

The number of respondents ranges typically from 10-20% of the participants. In 2008, the most recent conference, 208 or19% submitted conference evaluations. Figure 1 illustrates the growth of participants over the last 5 years of the conference and corresponding submissions of the conference evaluation surveys.
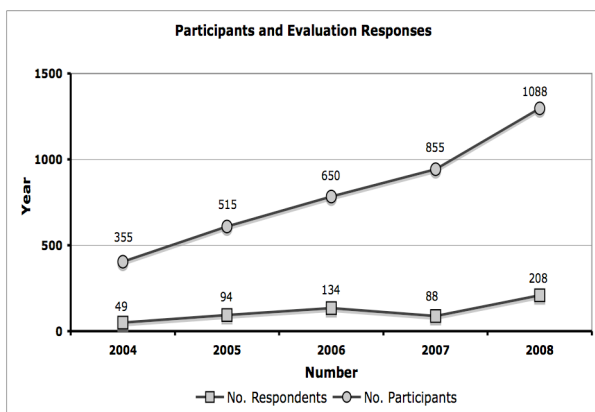


Figure 1: Participants and Evaluation Responses

## 4.3 Content quality

Over the past four years the quality of the content covered during the conference was rated extremely highly, over 95% indicating that the content was good to excellent.

## 4.4 Conference Theme

Likewise, participants responded extremely positively to the statement that the conference theme was relevant to teaching and learning today. When this category was rated (2004-06), positive responses ranged between 88% and 94%. Clearly, the conference planners have been able to deliver an event that is viewed as relevant and appropriate to its audience, primarily faculty and support staff interested in the use of educational technology for teaching and learning (see Figure 2).
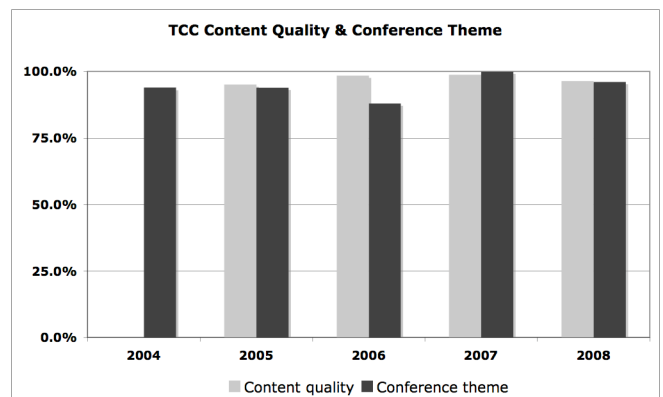


Figure 2: Content Quality and Conference Theme

## 4.5 Professional Development Benefit

Participants clearly view this event as having a positive benefit to their own professional development. This item showed a favorable response by 90% or more of the respondents (see Figure 3).

## 4.6 Feeling of belonging to a community

From the beginning, TCC conference coordinators believed that an online environment can be personal, interactive, and equal to or better than a conventional conference. In order to accomplish this, the conference offers multiple modes of communication and interaction in both real-time and on-demand.

The sense of belonging to a community results from interacting, cooperating and collaboration, as in a geographical community that may be described by a common set of characteristics, including knowing one another by participating in community events.

A survey of the participants showed that indeed they felt a sense of belonging to a community. Typically responses fell in the range of 75-85% in agreement that the conference does create a sense of community.
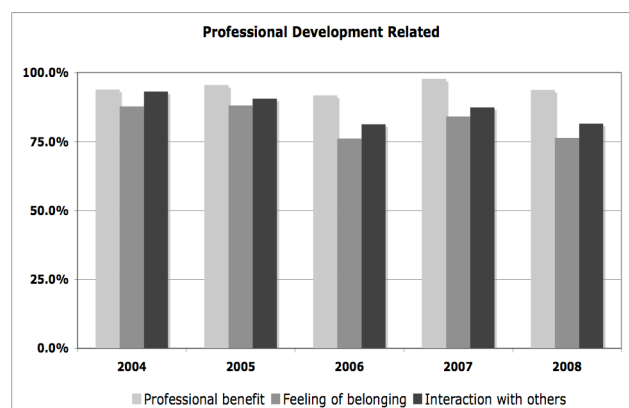


Figure 3: Professional Development Items

### 4.7 Interaction with others

Interaction also contributes to community building. When surveyed about the quality of the interactions of participants with speakers and other participants, the results were very positive, ranging from 81-93%.

### 4.8 Motivation

Faculty participants are motivated to participate in this event to increase their own professional development. In addition to being curious about the conference format, they want to gain access to expertise and build their own professional network of contacts. In 2008, for example, responses to the statement about what reasons cause individuals to participate were as follows: Professional development (28.6%), general knowledge (22.8%), access to expertise (16.7%), my curiosity (13.8%), networking with colleagues (10.7%), and sharing my work (5.3%). Only 2% indicated "other," suggesting that the statements adequately includes all of the possible reasons for participation (Table 1).

### 4.9 Compared to F2F

For the past two years, the evaluation instrument queried participants if they thought that this online conference was equal to or better than a traditional face-to-face event. In 2007, 78% agreed or strongly agreed. In 2008, the figure was 69%, representing a large majority.

### 4.10 Comments by Conference Participants

Over the years, conference participants have made comments such as the following extracted from the 2008 open-ended question, "The strongest features of this conference were:"

- *The range of excellent and interesting presentations.*
- *The excellent keynote speakers.*
- *Being able to connect and share ideas with a great range of other participants.*
- *Networking opportunities and exposure to new and innovative ideas.*
- *Really liked the Second Life presentations and events. Nice way to help participants network and learn more about new tools for education.*
- *Being able to receive feedback from colleagues from all over the world*
- *Flexible scheduling and not having to travel. Having materials available online to access when I wanted them was a plus.*
- *Like the face-to-face conferences, but this conference is needed when tight budgets and tight schedules are the norm.*

- *The ability to attend from my office.*
- *My work schedule couldn't allow me to attend many live sessions, but I loved that there were recordings so that I could go and "attend" the sessions that I wanted to, and in fact, it was great that I could view those sessions more than once, and can continue to view them.*
- *The new ideas I learned; the confirmation of ideas I have that I thought were right; the feeling that I am not alone with people who do not know about these topics.*
- *At major physical conferences, one usually sees cliques develop and interaction limited. This seemed less in the virtual conference venue.*
- *I have learned many new things and have been able to enhance my courses. I currently teach traditional, hybrid and online courses and know that my students benefit from my participation. Thanks again and I look forward to next year!*
- *I am a novice, but this type of conference speeds up the learning curve in techniques, topics, transition from the classroom to the virtual classroom.*
- *I found this conference better than many face-to-face conferences I have been to. I had no idea an online conference could be as powerful and informative as this one was.*
- *It has been the professional development highlight of my year so far!*

## 5. Summary and Recommendations

As online conferences and other virtual professional development activities continue to grow, a constant concern is whether or not the experience is as good as what one would receive in a traditional face-to-face conference. Our quantitative and qualitative data show that the TCC online conference is equal to or better than a traditional event. The results of the evaluation survey revealed consistently high ratings and positive comments for the quality of the content presented at the conference, the themes of the conferences, the professional development opportunities, sense of community and interaction with speakers and other participants.

The steady increase in participation over the years is another indication that the TCC conference has been successful in providing a quality professional development and networking experience. This trend in growth is likely to continue. As the rise in fuel prices increases travel costs for everyone, and as the prolonged slump in the world economy continues, it will be more difficult for faculty and staff to obtain

funds to attend geographically distant conferences.

The online conference eliminates travel and lodging costs and minimizes time away from work. Additional benefits to an online conference include 24/7 ubiquitous access to conference presentations and materials. Archived recordings of sessions allow those who missed or wish to review presentations, the ability to "attend" as many times from any location. Other benefits cited by online conference participants are a greater opportunity to interact directly with presenters and more opportunities to network with other colleagues worldwide.

The obvious downside to a worldwide online conference such as the TCC conference is that most people like to travel, especially to parts of the world they have never been to. They also like to meet and interact with other people who are physically present. Online conferences should not be viewed as a replacement for such face-to-face activities. Instead, online conferences offer additional opportunities to participate in a professional development activity that one would normally not have the time for or funds to attend.

TCC Worldwide Online Conference organizers will build upon the successes of previous TCC conferences and will continue promote this event to faculty and staff around the world. The conference will continue to adapt to emerging technologies and will implement them as long as the quality of the services provided to participants with limited bandwidth connectivity or technical skill is adequate. The scheduled pre-conference activities that allow participants to practice virtual conferencing have, over the years, reduced the amount technical difficulties and user error. Post-conference activities are also being considered to repeat, review or renew events that are of interest by participants and indicated in the evaluation survey.

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