

Evolution of a Virtual Worldwide Conference on Online Teaching

Curtis P. Ho, Ph.D., Research Fellow
Hyogo University of Teacher Education
Hyogo, Japan
Professor, University of Hawai'i at Manoa
Honolulu, Hawaii, USA
curtis@hawaii.edu

Bert Kimura, Ph. D., Visiting Professor
Osaka Gakuin University
Osaka, Japan

Shigeru Narita, Ph.D., Professor
Hyogo University of Teacher Education
Hyogo, Japan

Abstract

Virtual conferences began in the early 1990s by networking participants through asynchronous email. By the mid-90s, the Web and synchronous tools such as chat were additional features available to virtual conferences. In 1996, Kapi'olani Community College (KCC) in Hawai'i, launched The Teaching in the Community Colleges (TCC) Online Conference. This inaugural TCC conference attracted nearly 250 participants from Hawai'i and the continental United States. Email was the primary form of interaction between presenters and participants. Subsequent TCC conferences added newer technologies such as Web discussion forums, synchronous chat, streaming video and audio conferencing. The 11th annual TCC (now called Technology, Colleges & Community) Worldwide Online Conference was held in April 2006. Over 675 participants from 15 countries and 48 states used Elluminate Live, a web-based multimedia conferencing system, to interact synchronously through audio and text. The purpose of this paper is to describe how the TCC Worldwide Online Conference evolved to meet the needs of international participants and to take advantage of advancements in ICT.

Rationale and Need

For many years, educational leaders have sought innovative solutions for professional development to offset shrinking budgets. Advances in ICT have made it possible to facilitate the networking of professional learning communities while minimizing the travel costs and inconvenience for busy professionals (Anderson 1996). Travel factors are especially critical for educators located in remote areas. For example, a typical professional conference experience for a faculty member from Hawai'i who travels to the United States mainland may involve a week's absence from classes, in addition to 8-12 hours of flight time each way, and cost upwards of

3,000 USD (Kimura 2003). Thus, most Hawai'i faculty who do not have adequately funded research projects are limited to participating in a single out-of-state professional conference annually.

Faculty who teach online or who apply ICT to their research and teaching need frequent access to emerging information in the field. Recently, educators in Hawaii have been fortunate to have two professional conferences in Honolulu, sponsored by the Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education. ED – MEDIA: World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunication was held in Honolulu in June 2003. E-LEARN: World Conference on E-Learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, & Higher Education was held in Honolulu in October 2006. However, these were only recently held events. The PTC Telecommunications Conference is held annually in Honolulu but its focus has been broad and has traditionally been targeted for those in the telecom industry. Also, educators from the neighbor islands still need to incur travel and lodging expenses. An annual conference focusing on e-learning and online teaching for researchers and practitioners was not readily accessible to those residing in Hawaii in the mid-1990's.

Virtual Conference Launched

The cost of sponsoring a traditional face-to-face conference in Honolulu is extremely high and the human resources needed to manage all phases of activities can be overwhelming. Therefore, when the idea of hosting a professional conference entirely online was proposed by Dr. James Shimabukuro, a professor at Kapi'olani Community College (KCC) in Hawai'i, it received positive support from his colleagues. Thus, KCC launched the Teaching in the Community Colleges (TCC) Online Conference in 1996 to provide opportunities for Hawai'i faculty to network with peers and exchange ideas for research and teaching online. This inaugural TCC conference attracted nearly 250 participants from Hawai'i and the continental United States. In 2001 the conference was renamed the Teaching, Colleges & Community (TCC) Worldwide Online Conference to reflect interest from a broader academic audience and from more diverse geographical locations.

At the outset, email was the primary form of interaction between presenters and participants. The addition of other asynchronous applications such as listservs and an electronic bulletin board system (BBS) provided more efficiency and organization to the mediated events. Chat sessions were created to allow synchronous interaction between presenters and participants to facilitate the building of an online learning community. As higher bandwidths became more accessible to participants, emerging ICT applications were employed by the conference organizers. For example Table 1 illustrates the decrease in use of the dial-up modem from 2003 and increase of T1 and LAN connections. The web site became the focal point of the virtual conference. Web-based discussion forums and chat allow for both asynchronous and synchronous interaction between and among presenters, staff and participants. Keynote and paper presentations were available through streaming media as well as synchronous web conferencing systems such as "Horizon Live" and "Elluminate Live."

Table 1
Participant Internet Connection Type by Year

Conference Year	2003	2004	2005	2006
Dialup modem	21.4%	6.3%	5.7%	5.6%
Cable Modem	24.2%	27.7%	31.0%	28.8%
DSL Connection	19.4%	14.9%	18.4%	19.5%
T1/LAN Connection	35.0%	51.1%	34.5%	43.8%
Not sure	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	2.3%
Other			9.2%	

TCC Worldwide Online Conference Now

The TCC online conference has evolved into a global virtual event that allows faculty worldwide to participate at considerable less cost and loss of time from classes. This scholarly event provides teaching faculty with access to current information and expertise of their peers worldwide. Recently, the conference theme has dealt with various aspects of e-learning, especially online learning and the use of the Internet as a global resource for teaching and learning. This conference is also designed to foster the creation and continuation of a global learning community among faculty. Most activities are designed to encourage interaction and communication among the conference participants.

The TCC online conference follows a real-time schedule. It has a starting date and a closing date. Due to the global nature, events are scheduled 24 hours a day. Prior to the conference, attention is given to assisting registrants with developing basic skills in using a web conferencing system such as Elluminate Live. An equipment and connectivity check for participants is also conducted before the conference starts. Pre-conference activities also include announcements, practice sessions and “socializing”. At the official starting time, the conference begins with simultaneous greetings sent to email addresses and the conference website. Live keynote addresses are delivered throughout the duration of the conference. Paper presentations also begin and end at a scheduled time. Many other features that you would expect to find in a face-to-face conference are also present. Figure 1 below lists the variety of presentation formats used by TCC. Papers, posters, discussion topics and roundtable topics are posted on the website prior to the start of the conference. Participants are encouraged to interact with authors about their work using BBS or chat sessions. Authors are also scheduled for live presentations of their work using web-based conferencing. Papers, posters and slideshows use a structured presentation based on the posted artifacts. Discussion and roundtable sessions are focused on a topic or question and are often led by a panel or moderator to generate live discussion. All presentations are two-way audio interactive with synchronous chat embedded in the presentation site.



Figure 1. TCC Webpage: conference presentation formats

The TCC 2006 Worldwide Online Conference has evolved into a virtual space that exists beyond the parameters of the live conference. Participant prior to and after the conference have access to all of the virtual resources including: archived presentations, discussion forum, presenter’s bios and images, photo gallery, luau lounge (2-way audio, text and shared whiteboard), and coconut café for text chat. This online event is not limited to a specific location; it doesn’t require the participant’s physical presence; and it includes many opportunities for dialog. In the early days of TCC, email, chat logs, and discussion forums using BBS technology were archived for future review. Presently, the use of Elluminate Live allows slide shows with a live audio presentation to be recorded and viewed later. Conference evaluations indicate this playback feature was highly valued by participants. Concurrent sessions limit what 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. A central goal of this virtual conference is to create and maintain a sense of community among peers interested in teaching and learning online. A poll taken after each conference showed that this has consistently been achieved.

Evaluation and Changes

An online evaluation survey has been employed as a post conference activity since the outset. Table 2 shows mean scores from conference participants over the past five years. In general, mean scores have steadily improved over the years indicating participants have been increasingly satisfied with conference features and events. Open-ended questions have also been useful in assisting conference organizers with decisions on how to maintain and improve on the positive experiences of participants. Conference organizers and staff have also logged their concerns and suggestions for improvements. Below are some of the outcomes implemented as a result of evaluation data and feedback:

- As the conference began to expand internationally, a worldwide advisory panel of educators was formed in 2001 to guide the conference theme and direction each year thus providing greater diversity and access to global participants' needs. The theme focuses on both the practical aspects of online teaching and future directions for using ICT in e-learning.
- In 2004 the conference was outsourced to Learning Times, an organization specializing in virtual conferencing for education and training. As the TCC grew in numbers and the variety of technology used expanded, conference staff found it increasingly difficult to shoulder the workload on top of full-time jobs. The advisory panel decided on Learning Times because of the variety of technology that would be available in an integrated package.
- Participants have indicated a preference for live presentations using a web-conferencing system such as Elluminate Live (used by Learning Times) because it most approximates a face-to-face experience. Presenters using this system use audio, text chat, slides, websites and a shared whiteboard to interact with their audience. Polling, application sharing and file transferring are also tools available to the presenter. Subsequently, the advisory panel decided to eliminate asynchronous-only presentations and text-chat only presentations.
- Feedback after the 2004 and 2005 conferences indicated a need to accommodate faculty from research universities who needed refereed publications for tenure and promotion. Thus the 2006 conference called for papers to be submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed online proceedings. Papers were rated using a double-blind review process. Accepted papers were published online at, <http://etec.hawaii.edu/tcc2006/proceedings/> prior to the conference.
- Participants as well as conference staff noticed a higher quality presentation for sessions that used a facilitator. Initially, a convener was used to introduce the speaker and to keep time. However, when certain conveners were more involved in the session, by asking guiding questions or by helping to engage participants in discussion, the interest and interactivity appeared to be very positive. Future conferences will be using trained facilitator volunteers for all sessions.

Conclusion

TCC Worldwide Online Conference organizers will continue to promote this event to faculty around the world. The conference will continue to expand its use of broadband technologies as long as the quality of the services provided to participants with limited bandwidth connectivity is adequate. Some participants have cited difficulty in receiving real-time events due to time zone differences. Consequently, coordinators are also evaluating the possibility of conducting "regional" events. Under consideration for future conferences is the use of blogs to maintain interaction between conference organizers, staff, presenters and participants throughout the conference and including the pre and post conference periods. Podcasting is another application being reviewed for future use. Since presentations are archived, would it

be possible to extract the audio track for distribution to portable devices via a podcast? Can presentations which include slides, whiteboard and other graphic images be turned into MPEG-4 movies and downloaded to video iPods? More for the advisory panel to ponder for next year.

Table 2
Mean Scores by Conference Features and Year (1=low, 4=high)

Total respondents		152	107	49	94	135
Conference features	Conference Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Pre-conference		3.17	3.36	3.63	3.44	3.47
Keynotes & featured presentations		3.16	3.39	3.77	3.56	3.60
Content		3.18	3.57	3.65	3.44	3.56
Live sessions		2.38	3.22	3.62	3.58	3.45
Discussion forums		2.85	3.18	3.27	3.27	3.65
Receiving help		3.15	3.57	3.50	3.55	3.65
Locating content		3.21	3.25	3.23	3.45	3.64
Quality of interaction		3.01	3.18	3.48	3.46	3.62
Conference web site		3.30	3.43	3.47	3.64	3.70
Professional development		3.13	3.33	3.55	3.57	3.50
Conference theme		3.18	3.59	3.47	3.47	3.45
Overall schedule		3.16	3.22	3.44	3.29	3.35
Communication with team		3.34	3.58	3.70	3.39	3.62
Registration procedures		3.40	3.65	3.84	3.45	3.64
Conference fees		3.22	3.41	3.76	3.32	3.51
Feeling of belonging		2.78	3.02	3.45	3.36	3.58

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