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The challenges and benefits of an online conference: Lessons learned by Celia Popovic (York University) and Erika Kustra (Windsor University)

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Abstract

In 2019 the Canadian Educational Developers Caucus ran their first online annual conference. Online events have multiple benefits, but they also present new challenges. The lessons learned from this experience are likely to be of interest and use to others running events online – particularly those which were held in person prior to the COVID-19 pandemic – and exploring the practical implications of what professional development will look in the near future.

1   Introduction

Conferences serve a critical function for exchange of knowledge, development of identity, establishment of values, defining new study areas, and legitimizing a field or an approach (Gross & Flemming, 2011). They also develop significant networks and communities (Budd et al., 2015; Kustra, et al., 2018).

We first experimented with an online conference before the outbreak of COVID-19 made online events a hot topic. Practical pressures such as decreasing budgets (Choudaha & Van Rest, 2018), and larger issues such as climate change, fueled by figures like Greta Thunberg (Alter et al., 2019), demanded action. Given these concerns, how can we meet the needs to share knowledge and maintain networks in an online setting?

In 2019 the Canadian Educational Developers Caucus (EDC) held their first online conference (EDC, 2019). The EDC is a constituency within the Society of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, with a mission to facilitate the advancement of educational development as a field of practice and scholarship (EDC, n.d.). The EDC Conference is hosted by a volunteer institution in a different location each year to encourage engagement and spread the travel costs in a country that spans thousands of kilometers and several time zones. The first EDC online conference had approximately 255 participants representing 11 countries (Figure 1). Here we aim to share what we learned.

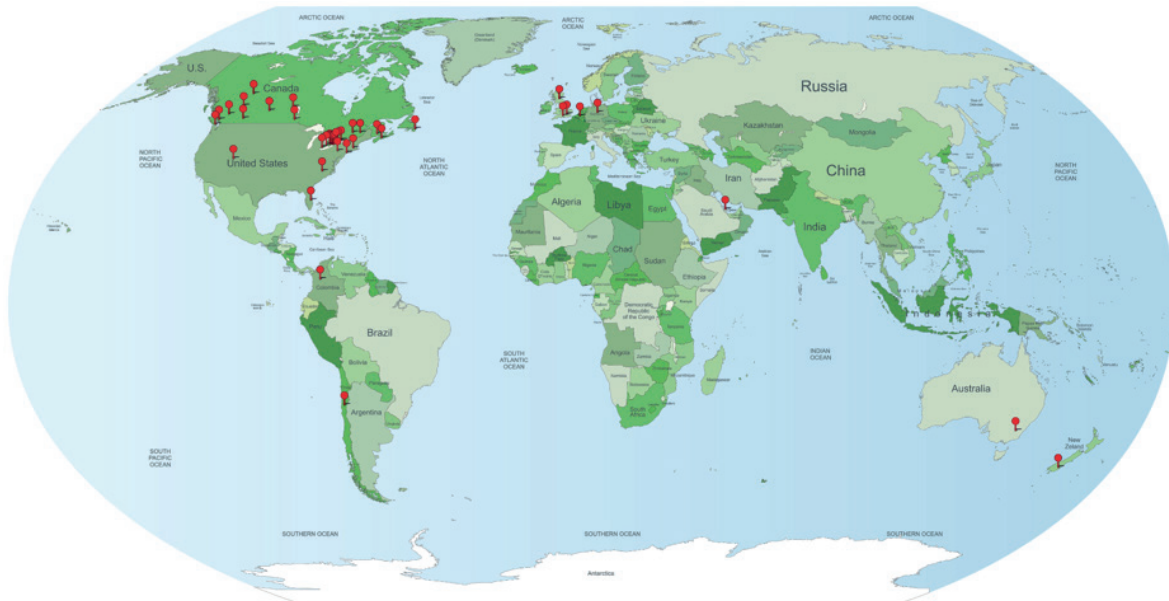[1] cpopovic@yorku.ca
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Figure 1: Participants represented 11 countries.

2   Challenges and benefits

The challenges for online conferences include those of any conference: deciding on a theme, location, keynote speakers, for example (Popovic, 2018). There are additional difficulties online including: *scheduling appropriate times* for numerous time zones in Canada, and for international participation; *enabling engagement*, as not everyone is attracted to online experiences; *technology* - choosing a platform that is stable, affordable, and easy for diverse audiences; and *online facilitation skills* to engage audiences and keep on time. Our largest challenge was to provide the *opportunities for networking* and informal professional conversations essential to the primary purpose of conferences (Kustra et al., 2018). To meet this, we encouraged participants to hold local events. Participants who joined local gatherings indicated that these provided valuable opportunities for networking and reflection.

Despite the challenges, we found that the benefits of holding an online conference were worth the effort. A major benefit was *decreased financial costs*. Large costs typically relate to the food and venue. Without these costs, the regular registration fee of $325CDN was reduced to $50 for individuals and $100 for a group. No one had to travel or pay for accommodation. The decreased financial costs had an added benefit of *increasing access* for people not traditionally able to participate. For example, one person indicated this was the first time they were able to participate in seven years, due their geographical location and the costs. The *impact on the environment* was minimal as a result of decreased travel. We did not have conference bags, badges, handbooks or disposable dishes, which all have both environmental and cost implications. Additionally, there was a decrease in some *logistical preparations*: booking spaces, hotel accommodations, catering or travel between venues.

The need for online options grew in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic spread, along with interest in practical suggestions based in the principles of good conference practice. For example, in April 2020 The Times Higher Education published key lessons (Popovic & Kustra, 2020).

3   Lessons learned

3.1   Reconsider timing

Holding a conference over two to three days allows momentum and focus, but its main reason is to accommodate travelers with limited time and funds. An online conference can be redefined. We wanted to ensure that all Canadian institutions could take part during office hours. Additionally, we anticipated international participants and advertised through ICED and national lists. Consequently, we changed the format from the usual two-day schedule to four half-days, decreasing time spent online daily. For some, this meant the conference took place in the morning, for others the afternoon. Sessions can also be extended over weeks or months. We discovered that it is impossible to repeat the time zone information too frequently if participants come from multiple time zones.

3.2   Keep it simple and familiar

For institutional conferences, use the established virtual learning environment. As we involved multiple institutions, we had to select a platform. The criteria included: availability of required features (video, audio, chat); no cost to participants; low cost to the conference organizers; history of reliability and stability; easy to learn; no requirement to download; availability of technical support for training; and troubleshooting.

3.3   Enable networking and serendipitous conversations

We encouraged institutions to hold small in-person gatherings, establish a support guide, and advertise opportunities. Several institutions welcomed colleagues from their neighborhoods, with many lively discussions held as a result. In a time of pandemic where physical meetings are less feasible, consider creating online groups who meet before, during or after sessions, to allow reflection. Encourage the use of discussion features, or the creation of informal virtual rooms, to enable conversations and share resources.

3.4   Consider alternatives to poster sessions

Our solution to the typical poster was the "Showcase". Participants shared resources in a variety of formats including documents, websites, videos, and podcasts. These were made available for asynchronous review and comment, followed by scheduled discussions with the authors in a virtual room, similar to viewing posters. This leverages online capabilities and items remain available after the conference.

3.5   Plan sessions

Parallel sessions enabled us to accommodate a larger number of presenters, but this does force a choice. If time is no longer a constraint, sessions can be in series. Each of our sessions had two people co-presenting, and one room host who provided a welcome and technical support. With two people as co-presenters, one can focus on the comments in the chat, and interact with the technical person if there are problems. Additionally, there is someone to continue the session if one of the presenters loses connection. Alternatively, consider "unconference" sessions that are created more informally according to the interests of those attending (Budd et al., 2015).

3.6   Plan training and support

Guides were available, and presenters and virtual room hosts took part in training sessions offered at multiple times. A virtual room host was a volunteer in each session to help with

troubleshooting. While most of the sessions ran smoothly there were some glitches; it is not possible to guarantee a problem-free experience.

3.7   Provide advanced access to the platform

We provided practice rooms so organizers, presenters, volunteers and participants could try out the platform beforehand. This helped to identify and resolve technical and pedagogical issues in advance.

3.8   Communicate regularly

Connection with participants was essential. We created a conference website including welcome videos from the executive and an online land acknowledgement that people could contribute to. We contacted participants every morning with a welcome, update, and easy links to join. It was also easy to provide access to resources after the event.

3.9   Modify budgeting

Online conference costs are significantly reduced, but not necessarily eliminated; consider the potential costs of the platform, website or keynote speakers.

3.10   Gather a good organizing team

It is helpful to have a small, but highly committed, organizing committee – with some comfort with technology and a willingness to jump in with both feet. We had one year to plan, though this could be decreased with an experienced team, or dedicated time. It is important to have a team that is action-oriented, reliable, and willing to learn together.

4   Conclusions

Overall, the online conference went smoothly, with many participants recommending online conferences in the future, or the inclusion of online elements within a traditional conference. Feedback from the conference was mixed, though, with some disliking the online format, identifying technical issues or feeling isolated, consistent with the challenges identified. Continuing to build networking and personal connections is essential to the primary purpose of conferences (Kustra et al., 2018). If we are to future-proof as individuals, institutions and educational developers, we need to rethink our habits and consider ways to address our needs without damaging the future.

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