

Following the Sun: Sustainable conferencing in a climate of change

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This paper reports on a new initiative in online conferencing that has resulted from the collaboration between three tertiary institutions on three continents and across three time zones. The paper describes the role of the Follow the Sun Online Learning Festival in revitalising professional online learning and networking events in a similar manner to the way in which e-learning revitalised tertiary education. The paper also discusses the evaluation of online conferences and introduces the new learning methodology as an alternative method for evaluating online conferences. The methodology used to evaluate the Follow the Sun Learning Festival is discussed and some preliminary findings are shared. Initial results suggest that online learning events have the potential to engage and connect professional peers and facilitators across traditional geographical boundaries. The potential for the Follow the Sun conference to result in new learning is however still unresolved.

Keywords: online conferencing, collaboration, evaluation, new learning

Introduction

Computers and the internet have long been attributed with revolutionising and revitalising teaching and learning within the tertiary education sector (Selwyn, 2007). Advances in internet based communication technologies have been noted particularly for improving distance education. Furthermore, online instruction enables the interaction and exchange of information between learners based on physical campuses or in distant or disadvantaged locations (Johnson, Aragon & Shaik, 2000) and has as a result been attributed with improving access to educational opportunities and promoting interactivity and collaboration between learners.

Conferences and training events have for many years been perceived as a primary tool for improving professional knowledge and networking, resulting in improved competence and performance in practice (Anderson & Anderson, 2012). With the increasing economic and environmental costs associated with long-distance travel, many organisations have implemented environmental policies to limit meetings that involve travel and professionals are required to be more restrained with the number and range of professional development opportunities they engage in. Anderson and Anderson (2009) identified that although many organisations have overcome these restrictions by using online communication technologies for meetings, few organisations have committed to delivering traditional face-to-face conferences or training events wholly online.

Online professional learning conferences or events offer the potential to combine the e-learning models developed for online tertiary education with the needs of participants prevented from attending conferences as a result of time or travel restrictions. Web conferencing software enables synchronous internet-based collaboration and communication and is therefore ideally suited to enabling the interaction between facilitators and participants so valued in traditional face-to-face training or conference proceedings. Online conferences by themselves are not a radically new concept, but as online conferencing technologies continue to become more inexpensive, ubiquitous and advanced, there is greater potential to leverage these resources to enhance the future of learning for students and professionals. The challenge for learning organisations that are preparing to move towards hosting or facilitating online conferences is to develop events that will attract and sustain the engagement of online audiences, rather than simply repurposing the processes and formats followed in the past.

This paper reports on an attempt to offer an online conference synchronously in a new and innovative manner. The format of the conference was intended to capture the attention of a global, multi-disciplinary audience, facilitate the development of digital communities within disciplines and present new ideas for using digital technologies for learning within these disciplines. The conference was hosted over a period of 48 hours in three continents and time zones and connected more than 300 participants in over 40 countries. A comprehensive

evaluation of the conference was conducted to determine the extent to which participation in the event resulted in new learning and the sustained effect of these learning's over time. The aim of the evaluation was also to determine whether the format utilised was suitable for engaging and sustaining the attention of attendees participating at their desks from personal computers across time zones and was able to meet their learning expectations.

Follow the Sun Online Learning Futures Festival

The University of Southern Queensland is committed to excellence in applied research as well as the utilisation of innovative technologies for the future. A significant event supporting this research strategy has been the conduct of a non-stop, 48-hour online global conference, the Follow the Sun Online Learning Futures Festival, now in its second year of offer in this format.

In 2012, the event was organised by the Australian Digital Futures Institute at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ, Australia), Beyond Distance Research Alliance at the University of Leicester (UK) and Athabasca University (Canada). The festival was held entirely online, delivered through the web conferencing system, Blackboard Collaborate. It ran non-stop for 48 hours, held over six shifts of eight hours each, with consecutive handovers between Australia (USQ), United Kingdom (Leicester) and Canada (Athabasca). Australian Digital Futures Institute and Beyond Distance Research collaborated in 2011 to host the conference using Adobe Connect. The 2011 conference focused on educational technology, whereas the aim of the conference in 2012 was to examine knowledge development and exchange across disciplines.

There were 266 registrations for the conference in 2011 but over 750 registered across 35 countries in 2012 (see Figure 1 for a graphical representation of the countries of all registered delegates). The festival was free to all participants and recordings of all sessions were made available after the event, supporting the concept of open educational resources. The decision to make the event free in 2012 was consistent with the University's mission to enable broad participation in higher education and to make a significant contribution to research and community development.



Figure 1: 'Where are you?' Map created of delegates who registered for Follow the Sun 2012

The festival featured keynote speakers from across the world representing a mix of disciplines including Engineering, Computer Science, Sports Psychology, European Politics, Nursing, Midwifery and Ethnomusicology. The primary goal of the conference was to move beyond the theme of educational technology and bring together university staff and students within these disciplines from across the globe to share new ideas, exchange information and explore knowledge development. The festival was split into four-hour sessions containing presentations, keynotes, interviews and panel discussions, with each session focusing on the possible digital futures of a particular discipline.

The second goal of the conference was to present an online learning event in an innovative and sustainable manner. The event was designed to be flexible and accommodate time pressures experienced by participants by allowing delegates to log in and out as they pleased and to have access to session recordings. As the registration was free, the conference was designed to be openly accessible, regardless of geographic location or economic

restrictions. Lastly the conference drew on the potential offered by technologies such as Blackboard Collaborate to enhance the learner experience and facilitate collaboration through the use of features such as two-way audio, multi-point video, interactive whiteboard, application and desktop sharing, rich media, breakout rooms, and session recording. The conference supported the university's mission of offering quality professional education opportunities that are accessible, flexible and borderless.

Dickinson (1992) stresses the importance of finding new ways of communicating and working together "to confront the problems that threaten the lives of human beings, countries, even the planet itself". Events such as the online Learning Festival can be energy-efficient and sustainable. These events contribute to a reduction of an institution's carbon footprint by being low cost, no travel events that allow participants to attend at their convenience. The conference was therefore also aligned with USQ's Sustainability Pledge, a list of objectives put in place to ensure the University is 'carbon neutral' by 2020.

Evaluation of Online Conferences

Anderson and Anderson (2012) maintain that the evaluation of the effectiveness of professional conferences in achieving improved learning and performance is greatly lacking and focus mostly on the immediate reaction or satisfaction of participants. New learning (NL) is primarily a qualitative methodology proposed by Chapman Wiessner, Storberg-Walker, and Hatcher (2007) as an alternative way of evaluating conferences. Users of this method focus on asking participants to provide information on new learning they have experienced or new questions that have occurred to them as a result of the conference. The question is a reflective question that is intended to prompt participants to provide deeper information on their perceptions and experiences (Chapman et al., 2007) and is ideally suited to professional conferences where new learning is an intended outcome. Making the data collected available to stakeholders is considered to be an essential component, as this enables participants to reflect on divergent perspectives and experiences of conference attendees.

Few studies have been reported using the new learning approach to evaluate conference attendance and no studies, to the authors' knowledge, have been reporting using similar methodologies to evaluate the effectiveness of online learning events. The evaluation approach used for the Follow the Sun Online Learning Festival in 2012 was developed according to the key principles of the new learning approach but was modified to be more manageable within the fast paced online festival environment. The purpose of conducting an evaluation was to not only provide information on the value of the event at its conclusion but to provide insights into the long-term impact of new learning's and information gained.

Evaluating the Follow the Sun Online Learning Festival

The aim of the evaluation of the Follow the Sun Online Learning Festival was to enable a comprehensive and multifaceted analysis of the experiences and perceptions of participants. The evaluation was developed to obtain insight into not only the satisfaction of participants and reactions to the conference but also to capture the benefits and limitations of the event as experienced by participants and identify whether any new learning occurred as a result of participation.

Due to the fast paced nature of the conference and the dispersed geographical location and time zones of participants, it was not possible to fully integrate the evaluation into the conference proceedings as participants would have little time to reflect on learning's and provide detailed responses. As a result, it was decided to use a summative online survey as the primary evaluation instrument. The evaluation was further supported by short evaluation questions after each session posted using Blackboard's survey features and the information provided by participants was immediately available to facilitators. These results are not presented in this paper.

Methodology

An online survey evaluation questionnaire was distributed at the end of the conference to all participants who registered for the Learning Festival event. Participants were requested to complete the survey regardless of whether they attended the event or not. A number of directed questions were included that would allow the research team to identify reasons for registering but not actually participating in the conference. This enabled the identification of preferences for formats that may attract attendance and make future online events more accessible and convenient.

The survey consisted of a range of closed and open ended questions that sought demographic and background information, conference participation information including access trends and frequency, familiarity and usage

of social media, feedback on experiences and preferences for future online learning events. None of the survey questions were compulsory so that respondents did not need to answer questions they were not comfortable with. As a result some of the samples sizes for questions may differ.

The section that focused on participant experiences moved beyond simply indicating satisfaction with events and resources. Questions were targeted at finding out detailed information on the benefits and limitations of the conference to participants during the conference as well as the impact of the conference on personal learning and potential future practice.

To identify the extent to which any new learning obtained during the conference had a long term impact on individuals and organizations, respondents could opt in to receive reminders about the new learnings and intended actions they identified in future surveys to determine whether they were able to implement them. These reminders were sent out with detailed feedback on the responses to the evaluation surveys at 3 months, 6 months and 1 year after the event. As the evaluation is in the final stages of analysis, the data has not been fully analysed and only preliminary findings are reported in this paper.

Findings and Discussion

A total of 192 completed the survey of which 115 participated in the conference and 77 did not. The majority of respondents described their role as either an academic (n=58, 33%) or an educational designer (n=44, 25%) with 17% describing themselves as professional staff (n=29), 10% as researchers (n=17) and 8% as students (n=14) or other (n=12, 7%). Females formed the majority of the sample with 66% (n=108) participating in the research and only 34% males (n=56). Respondents were from a range of age groups with the majority between 50 and 59 (n=57, 35%) and 40 to 49 (n=49, 30%). Ten percent (n=17) were over the age of 60 and 25% under the age of 30 (41).

Learning festival participation trends

The festival reached a dispersed audience with only 27% from the three partner universities that hosted the event and the remaining 73% from other organisations. Approximately one in three (28%) respondents attended the previous Follow the Sun Festival in 2011 which suggests that the event is attracting a larger and more diverse range of participants year on year.

Respondents were requested to provide some information on participation trends to assist in identifying reasons for registering but not attending the conference or for only attending a few sessions. Although the goal of the conference was to move beyond discussions about learning technologies and result in the development of digital communities within disciplines, the primary reason why participants were attracted to the Online Learning Festival was because of a particular interest in learning technologies (44%). Very few were attracted to the event as a direct result of the relevance of the content to their discipline (18%) (Table 1).

The majority of respondents indicated that the primary reason for not attending more sessions or for not attending at all was because they were unable to take more time away from work (52%) or as a result of previous commitments (37%), with only a small percentage not attending as a result of lack of interest (10%) or technical difficulties (11%) (Table 2). This suggests that the time available to professionals for participation in digital communities and online learning is limited and should be taken into account when designing online learning events to maximize participation and value.

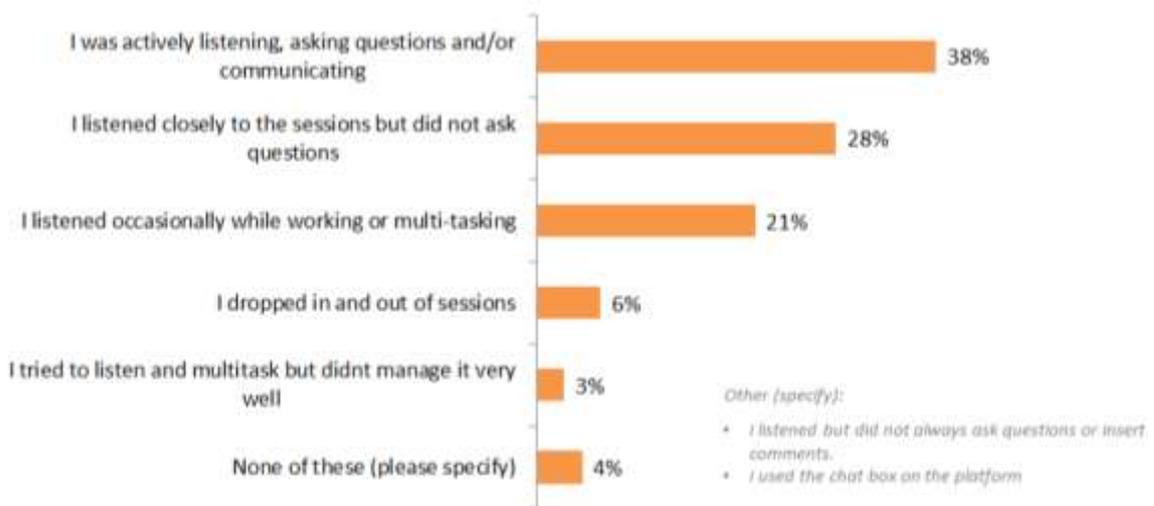
Table 1: Reasons for interest in Online Learning Festival

What is the primary reason why you were interested in attending the Follow the Sun Learning Festival? (Select one)	Total	Participants who attended	Participants who did not attend
Particular interest in learning technologies	44%	37%	55%
General interest in the topics presented	19%	20%	16%
The content is directly related to my discipline	15%	17%	12%
Relationship with one of the participating host organization	11%	14%	5%
Opportunity to network	5%	3%	7%
Interest in a specific speaker	2%	2%	1%
Interest in a specific topic	2%	2%	1%
Other	4%	6%	1%

Table 2: Reasons for not attending more sessions

What were the primary reasons why you did not attend more sessions? (Select all that apply)	Total	Participants who attended	Participants who did not attend
I was unable to take time away from work to attend further sessions	51%	53%	49%
Previous commitments	35%	38%	30%
The time of the sessions I was interested in were inconvenient / outside my working hours	31%	30%	32%
Technical difficulties prevented further access	10%	8%	14%
The sessions were too discipline specific	9%	13%	3%
There were no other sessions that I was interested in	9%	9%	8%
Other	8%	7%	9%

Respondents who attended one or more of the Festival sessions were asked to describe their participation styles during the sessions. The large majority of respondents were actively engaged during the session and either asked questions or communicated with peers (41%) or listened closely without asking questions (28%). It appears that few participants only listen while working (19%) or drop in and out of sessions (5%) (Figure 2).



Please indicate which of the following are the closest to the way in which you participated in the sessions. (Select one) (n=116)

Figure 2: Actual trends for participating in sessions (Participants in Online Learning Festival, n=106)

Perceptions of the value and impact of the Online Learning Festival

Respondents were asked to provide insights through a series of open questions on their perceptions of the value and impact of the conference as well as their personal learning expectations. Preliminary analysis of the comments indicate that participants were intrigued by and valued the collaborative online experience offered by the Festival. Comments from the raw data include:

This year was a truly collaborative endeavour. I was intrigued by the 24-hour format and the calibre of hosts and presenters. Excellent speakers and panels, who know how to conduct themselves in synchronous environments, and well trained moderators. Enlightening and thought-provoking.

This has been extraordinary and probably the best single experience in my 10 years in Higher Education. So much breadth and depth and such a sense of connectedness.

Respondents have indicated that online learning events in this format are an attractive avenue for exploring new learning ideas, remain up to date with the latest trends in educational technology, feel a sense of community and network and connect with peers in similar fields. This suggests that the format employed for the Learning Festival does meet the needs of potential participants and is able to provide a sense of collaboration and community that participants value.

New learning that occurred as a result of the Online Learning Festival

As mentioned previously, the primary rationale for the evaluation of the Festival was to determine the extent to which new learning occurred. Respondents were requested to provide insight into any new learning they experienced or any new questions that have occurred to them as a result of participation in the conference. Forty one participants indicated that they experienced new learning as a result of the conference and twenty were interested in tracking the actions identified from these learnings in future surveys.

A large number of new learnings were focused on technology specific issues and were presented as broader thoughts rather than specific learnings or actions. Examples of these include:

A high level understanding of the direction technology is taking in learning and a stepping stone into further studies.

I learned a lot about virtual worlds, professional virtual learning, e-pedagogies and technology-enhanced learning. I also discovered how Blackboard worked and found it was a wonderful tool.

I thought about the use of technologies in new ways. Also, I had a greater insight into the challenges facing some disciplines.

Specific approaches for developing learning materials; better understanding of teaching practices internationally.

These findings suggest that either the evaluation instructions were not sufficiently clear or that the summative online evaluation tool was not the appropriate method for identifying learning and action as a result of the conference. Further probing into the responses of participants who agreed to participate in future surveys may provide a more detailed response.

Preferences for future formats of online learning events

Participants were asked to describe the barriers that they experienced most in attempting to attend online events in general. Difficulty in scheduling time off from work was the number one reason provided by nearly all respondents (80%). This suggests that there is scope to alter online learning events, particularly lengthy conferences, to be more flexible and more easily accommodated within busy work schedules.

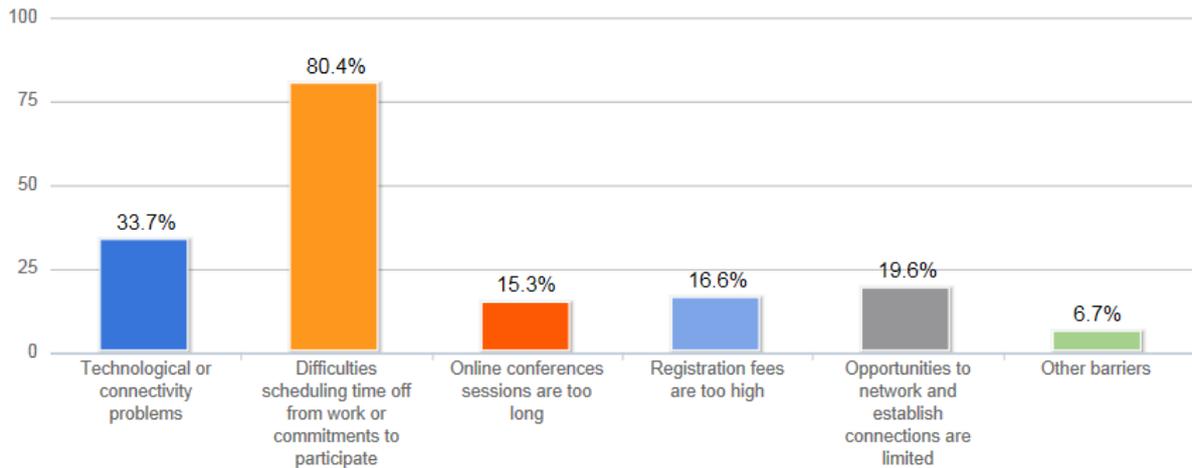


Figure 3: Barriers experienced in attempting to attend online events in general

The answer to this concern may lie in the development of online conferences that utilize both synchronous and asynchronous features. Respondents were requested to select their preferences for alternative formats for online conferences and a large proportion (34%) preferred events that included asynchronous components such as pre-recorded videos but also included synchronous features such as access to the presenter for questions in real time. Events that follow this format may satisfy the requirements of conference delegates to interact and collaborate with peers yet still enable flexibility by allowing them to watch the pre-recorded sessions at an earlier stage in their own time.



We are considering other approaches to offering online Festivals. Which of the following formats do you prefer the most? (Select only one) (n=172)

Figure 4: Preferred approaches for future Online Learning Festivals

Conclusion

Higher education is changing rapidly to address the imperatives of digital futures. Developing knowledge and experience of how to effectively lead and support online learning experiences and interaction as well as develop digital communities is critical to enhance skills and practice that can be applied across diverse contexts, despite geographical boundaries. This paper has provided an overview of a partnership between three tertiary institutions located across the globe that have collaborated to provide new opportunities for facilitating online learning, access to digital communities and networking for professionals. As the education landscape and learning needs of future students and professionals evolve and change, learning institutions will greatly benefit from joining together across global boundaries to provide unique and effective learning experiences. The paper also presents an overview of the methodology and preliminary findings of an evaluation conducted to assess the value and impact of these initiatives in stimulating new learning.

The results from the evaluation suggest that the Festival format presented in this paper has the potential to engage and connect participants in geographically dispersed locations and encourage future collaboration and communication. The potential for these events to create New learning as defined by Chapman et al. (2007) is however still uncertain. The findings further suggest that there is scope for improving the format of online conferences particularly lengthy sessions that require extensive time commitments from participants. The manner in which participants engage with online sessions, including the extent to which they actively participate and collaborate with peers synchronously requires further insight. This will assist conference developers in identifying formats that are able to capture the attention of participants for the full session time and result in new learning's and a tangible impact on practice. Online conference technologies have the potential to contribute significantly to enhancing professional conference experiences. However, additional research into participant behaviour and further innovation in delivery formats is required.

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