

Event One

An online Chat sponsored by the UCEA Outreach and Engagement Community of Practice on 7/25/02

Speaker Wayne Smutz

Topic: The Evolving Conferencing Business: Technology and Face-to-Face Learning

Facilitator: Hello Everyone Thanks for joining us! Wayne Smutz is joining us today to talk about the future of conferencing and Distance Education.

Wayne - Speaker

Hello. This is Wayne Smutz. I am Sr. Director, Outreach Program Development and Associate Director, Division of Continuing Education at the Pennsylvania State University. I've volunteered to start our conversation today. I've put together a couple of paragraphs on this topic. I'll let you read and then begin to start asking questions--one at a time. I'll let you respond to questions and will move from one question to the next after I think all responses are in. OK--let's go.

Wayne - Speaker

The Evolving Nature of University-Based Educational Conferencing: Using Technology as Part of Face-to-Face Learning Environments The visibility and use of e-learning and distance education dramatically increased over the last five years. The continued spread of technology throughout people's work and personal lives and the demands of busy lifestyles made and will continue to make access to learning through technology highly attractive to increasing numbers of individuals. Organizations and businesses find it increasingly difficult to release staff to attend professional development activities. Schools, for example, cannot find substitute teachers; hospitals have a shortage of nurses, and many industries need employees on-the-job to meet production schedules. Employers in these situations more and more look to alternative means to provide access to professional development and learning experiences for their staff. The events of September 11 altered perspectives as well. More people than ever are reluctant to travel and want to remain close to home as much as possible, at least for now and probably for the foreseeable future. What is the future of university-based face-to-face educational conferencing in the context? Perhaps the only certainty is that things will be different. Certainly conferencing and/or other types of face-to-face experiences where people come together in one location in time and space to learn will not disappear. A study by the College Board (2001) indicated that 85% of adults surveyed preferred face-to-face environments for credit and non-credit types of learning experiences. Neither is it likely, however, that the conferencing business of the future will simply be an extension of the past. The changes outlined above in terms of access to technology, the structure of people's lives, and the demands of employers will create challenges for conferencing professionals and businesses. In addition, as younger people who have been exposed to technology throughout their entire lives become the primary audience for conferencing type experiences, the

technology-based fears and anxieties that affect at least some of those to whom personal use technology is relatively new will likely no longer exist or be minimal. Finally, it is clear that technology used in education is simply going to get better and easier to use in the years ahead.

This analysis suggests that it is unlikely that there will be a dramatic drop in the conferencing business. What is more likely is that there will be a gradual but fairly continuous decrease over time in the numbers of those attending conferencing events that exclusive use face-to-face program designs. This could be the case unless those in the conferencing business change with the times. The growth of e-learning and distance education methodologies should be looked at as opportunities for maximizing the learning experience of adults, and as tools for creatively designing new approaches to conference events. There is not a choice to be made between face-to-face conferencing and the use of technology. The key issue is how to best utilize the unique capabilities of each separately as well as together.

Questions 1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the above statement? Why?

Participant M.O. I agree. Conferencing will continue to emphasize face-to-face format but technology will play a more significant role. The issue is that the right tech needs to be incorporated -- not technology just for the sake of technology.

Participant M.G.

Wayne: I am going to hedge my bets on this and say that I both agree and disagree. What I do think is that those of us who are in the conference business should look at is, in your last sentence. How can we use the unique capabilities of technology to enhance our current practice?

Participant B.B.

I agree that face-to-face learning environments will not go away. People in general are social creatures and tend to want to be around other people. And, we've seen in other media that when a new one is introduced, the others do not become obsolete. We have TV and radio and newspapers...none has completely replaced the others. We need to integrate and enhance the learning experience like they are doing with digital TV...watch, log-on to learn more, etc.

Participant H.W.

The technology must fit the needs of the customer in question. The key will be to have the interface between the customer and the technology be customizable.

Wayne - Speaker

Good point, M.G. I wonder what people think the unique capabilities are?

Participant T.S.

I'm not sure I see the face-to-face attendance as zero sum. My sense is that the decreasing number of managers and the increasing interdisciplinary of work in organizations will encourage more communication. While some of this can certainly be electronic, it will also be face-to-face.

Participant S.W.

I agree that people will supplement face-to-face activities with more distance approaches. I don't think we really know yet how much distance education may replace face-to-face, or in what areas. We need to do more to emphasize the advantages of face-to-face experiences to keep this delivery attractive to people.

Participant M.G.

I might elaborate by saying that I can now use technology to market face-to-face instruction, to enhance the experience by providing materials both pre and post conference, to make segments of the conference available to those who can't attend, and to bring in speakers or presenters that might not otherwise have been able to engage.

Participant M.M.

The research also shows that customers require an appropriate blend of face-to-face and integrated technology.

Wayne - Speaker

Actually, MG's last comment is a good segment into the next question. 2. In what ways might technology best be used to enhance university-based face-to-face conferences or workshops---prior to, during, and/or after the events?

Participant H.W.

Adding the technology to the conferencing business allows for more global participation and has the opportunity to increase attendance at conferences because participants can remain engaged when they are no longer in the face-to-face atmosphere.

Participant M.O.

First technology can help address the access issue -- more people can attend.

Participant S.W.

I can see some real potential for building upon face-to-face learning through follow-up distance approaches, especially where people learn new skills that require reinforcement, practice, and sharing of experiences.

Participant BB

I am thinking that we can create an MTV experience or a multi-dimensional experience during the conference --Sight, sound, action, in addition to having face-to-face interaction.

Participant MG

I agree with S.W. I also think that building relationships over time is the key to success rather than counting on single event relationships. Maintaining relationships over time will also allow us to measure the impact of what the experience was.

Wayne - Speaker

I agree with the access and the re-enforcement issues. I've been particularly concerned over the years with the lack of reinforcement following face-to-face events.

Participant S.W.

As a conference attendee myself, I can also see some real value in having Web access to conference materials such as PowerPoint presentations and handouts, especially for sessions I may have missed.

Participant M.D.

There's also the option of adding conferencing or F2F activities with primarily distance approaches to learning. Distance with F2F at the beginning of the semester, mid semester, and end of semester? Does this make a better learning experience?

Participant T.S.

Since a large part of the motivation for attending a conf is to see your buddies and for social interaction, I'd like to use the technology to know who will be attending and to have the capability for me to contact my buddies about dinner and other social activities.

Participant S.T.

I agree with SW--we do need a better understanding of why people prefer face-to-face and how we can translate that into a marketing message. We also need to know what kinds of distance education opportunities our different conferencing audiences might prefer--because we're in a higher ed setting, we have access to and a comfort level with a lot of technological advances. I'm not sure that's true of many of our conferees. Of course, that will improve and in a few years, we may find audience readiness is much greater.

Participant A.K.

I want to enter that nothing is more deadly than the non-interactive use of technology.

Participant S.W.

I think what TS suggested is important. We could use pre-conference links to participants to set up dinner round-tables on certain topics and to tailor other events to the specific needs of the audiences.

Wayne - Speaker

I, for one, think that we need to work hard on identifying the real benefits of face-to-face engagement. We've often used conferences as content dumps---do we really need to continue to do that?

Participant BB

I am concerned that we are still focusing on current uses of technology. We need to think ahead to what our teen-age generation is currently experiencing and what they will want in a learning environment. How will technology enhance their learning experience?

Wayne - Speaker

I also believe we could use face to face environments to start learning communities---that could carry on long after the conference was over.

Wayne - Speaker

OK--you with teenagers---what do you think they might want in a learning environment?

Participant S.W.

I think there is a culture in some fields that conferences should be content dumps, and changing that may be difficult in the short term. The newer technologies actually give us the opportunity to build on those content dumps by letting people exchange ideas about the utility of what they learned.

Participant T.S.

I agree with Wayne about how we frequently use conferences as content dumps, including UCEA meetings. This really begs the question on the purpose of conferences. For me, it does have something to do with meeting with colleagues in an informal situation. The content, for me, is almost secondary. I get what I want to know by talking with colleagues in the hallways and meal functions.

Participant A.K.

My 11-year-old uses on-line chats all the time to self-direct his learning. He is old hat to him. This addresses the teen-age question.

Participant S.T.

In answer to Q2, my instinct tells me that technology might best be used prior to the conference. There are some exciting possibilities for setting the stage with conferees and building a community prior to the actual event. People usually look forward to attending conferences and may be more interested in participating in events that will enable them to maximize their participation.

Wayne - Speaker

I was struck by a study in the mid 80s by Arden Groteleuschen that found that the number 1 reason professionals go to conferences was to talk to colleagues.

And yet, I'm not sure we've effectively harnessed that motivation. Perhaps we can really focus on it now.

Participant A.K.

Q2, California had a great model for integrating on-line resources and on-line resources with face-to-face learning depending on the pedagogical fit and the ability of staff to travel. This was at least 15 years ago.

Wayne - Speaker

Let's move on to Question 3. Are you aware of particularly exemplary efforts or best practices that utilize technology as part of face-to-face conferencing?

Provide specific examples if possible.

Participant S.W.

I agree that there's a lot of potential for pre-conference use of technology. With continuing professional education, I think post-conference interchanges among attendees on implementation issues could be very valuable, especially for professionals who are relatively isolated in their work settings.

Participant S.T.

Re content dumps: For many of our audiences, an employer is paying the freight. They are not paid for someone to network for a couple of days. Using DE to extend the learning and information exchange beyond the "live" event may be perceived as an extra bonus from the employer perspective.

Participant M.O.

Is there any data that helps us understand if and to what degree people participate electronically in conferencing?

Participant A.K.

There is the old model in distance ed of using seminars in one site to link to seminars in another site. Georgia had used this, I believe, in their tech colleges.

Participant H.W.

The question is will they be willing to pay for that opportunity if a fee is involved.

Participant B.B.

So far, in the conferences that we've tried it, we haven't had much success with participants participating in discussions after the conference is over. Both business and communications programs tried this electronic follow-up.

Participant M.G

I think people are willing to pay for value added.

Participant A.K.

The problem with post-conference follow up is that it is an add-on and not a vital part of the learning experience.

Participant H.W.

I attended a conference on Literacy that used and established list-servs as a way to continue conversation... A forum like this one takes it to the next level.

Wayne - Speaker

Perhaps if people paid for a post conference opportunity separate from the conference fee and up front, they would be more likely to participate. That still leaves the issue of how to build value and what value looks like in this context.

Participant S.T.

We're going to survey past attendees for the Eating Disorders conferences. One of the things we're going to try to determine is their interest in using DE and technology in some capacity either before or after the program. We may learn something of value from this. The audience is entirely university-based, however, which is not necessarily representative of professionals at large.

Participant B.B.

We talked earlier though about reinforcement and helping during the practice/implementation experience after the conference. That is what we attempted to do through an e-mail medium.

Participant A.K.

What is the best pedagogical use of the technology? I don't think it is to continue the experience.

Participant L.M.

If you want people to pay to be on a list serv, I think you need to be offering access to experts.....

Participant M.O.

On-site attendance is based in part on making a commitment of time, money, being away from work, willingness to network, etc. Are there similar commitments people will make to participate in an on-line conference?

Wayne - Speaker

I think it depends on what "continue the experience" means. If I learn something new that I want to try out, I might want to talk with someone about the nature of my experience (as well as others' experience) after I try it.

Participant B.B.

Good point, M.O. I think being away sometimes forces one to concentrate. It is easy to get distracted while sitting at your desk in your office.

Participant S.W.

I'm not sure I understand why we wouldn't use technology to continue the experience. Professionals often want to share the outcomes of using new things they've learned.

Participant H.W.

I agree with LM for a list or a site like this one to have value, there must be value added by having speakers... new resources to look at that would help me in my job... and opportunities to learn...not just network.

Participant A.K.

I keep getting back to the learning objectives. When I make a commitment of time and resources to attend a conference, there has to be value to not having an end to the conference. So you would have to use the technology for reinforcement, not just discussion.

Wayne – Speaker

Is anyone aware of particular institutions that appear to be integrating technology into face-to-face is? The current question has to do with "exemplary practices".

Participant A.K.

California Dept. of Ed

Participant L.M.

When I want to talk with people after a learning experience, it's usually because I am having trouble applying what it is I just learned. It's frustration or anxiety, not desire for reflection (however valuable that may be).

Wayne - Speaker

Perhaps we're ready for Question 4. 4. What types of training might educational providers benefit from as they begin to consider integrating technology into face-to-face conferencing activities and program designs? What kind of training/education might University conference staff members need immediately?

Participant S.T.

Let's admit it, being away from the office is the BEST thing about attending a conference! It's wonderfully energizing to be able to focus on learning, unencumbered by email, phone calls, family obligations, etc. The same simply cannot be said of this format--I find myself wanting to peek at my email! Nonetheless, there are clearly some useful applications for technology and one may be to reach audiences that can't or won't attend conferences or workshop.

Participant A.K.

As for training for staff--I think some basic courses in instructional design using technology.

Participant M.O.

Training in understanding the technology and ways to measure its effectiveness.

Participant S.W.

I think it would be useful for all staff just to have an overview of the many possibilities of using technology in conjunction with face-to-face learning.

Wayne- Speaker

I see that Penn State's higher ed program is offering a course this fall on the impact of technology on education. Might be useful for some of us to at least audit it.

Participant M.O.

Plus it takes practice in actually using it -- such as this chatroom format.

Participant H.W.

Training on how to evaluate an online experience would be important.

Participant M.H.

A conference is a meeting of two or more persons for discussing matters of COMMON concern.....formal interchange of views, ideas and tacit and/or explicit knowledge....

Participant B.B.

Perhaps we are dealing with this topic prematurely. Remember when TV became available? We had "talking head" programs. It took us awhile (not that I was around then, but I read a lot about it) to figure out the appropriate use of this medium in the learning environment. Perhaps on-line conferencing isn't the best format or use of the technology. Thoughts?

Participant S.T.

We need to know what technologies are available, how they work and when they should be used. This is what Avis is getting at, I think. Just because we can do it, doesn't mean we should--knowing when to use what technology is key.

Participant A.K.

Aren't there still a lot of talking heads? It takes a long time to have creative and effective use of technologies.

Participant M.H.

Does a conference impacts on changing one's behavior? Or just inform us about new ways to do things or new trends, etc?

Participant A.K.

There was a former office of technology assessment in the federal govt. They spent years looking at technology use in education. Some of it was very

advanced. We should spend some time looking at the literature for research and best practices.

Participant S.W.

I think the impact of a conference depends a lot on how it is structured. Some may lead to real behavior change, while others just stimulate thinking about new ideas.

Participant A.K.

There is a lot of evidence that one intervention (training) does not change behavior--thus the use of technology to reinforce or continue training.

Wayne - Speaker

5. What types of staff support might be needed to integrate technology into face-to-face conferences? Where should such staff reside---within conferencing units? As a stand alone unit? As part of distance education operations? As part of private businesses that conference centers access through outsourcing? Why?

Participant S.W.

Certainly some instructional design support would be critical, and someone with background in the use of various technologies.

Participant M.O.

Technical staff are definitely needed -- there is nothing more frustrating than trying to communicate when all of a sudden the technology goes on the blink.

Participant T.S.

It seems to me that the first challenge is to train the CE program development personnel. Then, with this knowledge, they can share their insights with faculty contacts. In short, we need to train the sales force, first.

Participant M.M

Agree with MO, tech failures are major distractors w/ distance learners I have talked with

Participant M.O.

We also need training in how to evaluate on-line conferencing and activities.

Wayne – Speaker

What about the location of the staff support? Any thoughts on how to best position them?

Participant S.W.

I'm not sure where the best place for support staff to reside would be. Wherever it is, though, it would be important that their priority be with cross-unit activities and not just with a single unit's major goals.

Participant K.B.

I think this goes back to discovering best practices - what type of examples are out there that have a proven track record that programs can borrow ideas from and then the "sales staff" can sell.

Participant S.T.

I think it's too early to know exactly what kind of staffing we need to support this. For now, the strategy we're using today--contracting with a private vendor-- makes sense--it gives us an opportunity to try different technologies and evaluate them from a variety of perspectives. Once we know more about what works and what doesn't, we'll be better positioned to determine what kind of staff support we need and what unit they should be attached to.

Participant M.D.

I agree with Stephanie on this, although I think that cross-training among those interested across our units would be a good start.

Wayne - Speaker

As we wind this down, does anyone else have any question they want to get out about this topic?

Participant A.K.

Or outsourcing as opposed to building internal resources that may have short life spans.

Participant L.M.

There's an advantage of creating a core of people who have similar tasks that work together and support each other, but a highly centralized model slows the processes down.

Wayne – Speaker

If there's nothing else--thanks to all of you for joining in this initial effort.

Participant S.W.

Thanks for moderating, Wayne!

Participant T.S.

Thanks to everyone for participating.

Facilitator

Nice job, Wayne! Thanks for coming everyone! Our time is up!