Future Web Use by Conferences: Frustrations, Challenges, Cautions

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Good morning, and thank you for coming to what we might call a mini conference about putting the internet to good use at conferences. I am going to introduce our panel, whom I can say without exaggeration are people who think about the challenges we are going to discuss today all their waking moments, and then provide some opening thoughts.

After introductions…Margaret Jacob, Keith Carpenter, Phil Ice, Karan Powell, Daniel Gutierrez-Sandoval

I worry that these remarks may seem mundane to you, even platitudinous, because my views reflect that I have been struck again and again about how behind we are in using the basic technological innovations, let alone what is promised in the near future. I understand why Henry Ford when the mass production of the automobile started said that people could have any color they wanted as long as it was black, because the tools we now have seem to exceed our ability to use them all. I will be interested in how our panelists feel about that: do they think for example that we have reached a point of saturation in innovation.

I don’t believe the feeling is widespread that academic conferences are terribly exciting. One factor that
contributes to the routine and lacklustre nature of conferences is the hidebound attitudes that characterize many in the professorate.

However, that is being challenged more each day. Seldom do what appear to be embedded attitudes in research and scholarship change from negative to positive as quickly as they have over the uses of online and web in the academic world.

Only five years ago the mention of online as a major part of the academy was greeted with the same scowl that cats get when they bring dead birds to the back door. It was viewed as crass commercialism and tawdry showmanship that had snuck in the faculty room uninvited. Scholars who embraced the new technology were regarded as apostates. Certainly none of us had ever heard about moocs.

How the scene has changed! Now the most prestigious institutions are in madcap races to create online courses, and librarians worry that reading rooms will look half empty as everyone prefers to work at home.

So, where is this taking us? Particularly, what is going to happen with conferences. One has to keep in mind that few predictions of where technology is taking us will prove spot on. Imagine forecasting what has happened from a perspective of ten years ago. The fact is that the consequences are probably going to be unfolding in a different form what any of us can predict.
However, as with many innovations, the changes are not all that dehumanizing or bad. Many people will testify that they communicate with friends and family far more now than they did with the post office. So I believe that our approach to these possible changes and their effect on us should be positive if we can think the problems through.

Having seen what has happened so quickly in education, it is strange that those in closely allied fields like conference planning are oblivious to the possibility that the same rude shocks do not await us. In particular I refer to learned societies and to conferences. While universities now realize that they must make the best of what the internet makes possible, that is a reality which has not yet fully penetrated the halls of learned societies or of scholarly conferences. How curious that MIT and Harvard feel the need to go online with gusto but we chug along with a conference format that is very much the same as generations ago. Now we are starting still another conference tradition and thinking about what that should be seems entirely appropriate.

It is a matter of consequence. The income from conferences is of course the meat and potatoes of professional societies, along with their journals. Of the several hundred such societies in Washington, a large number derive the better part of their revenue from those two sources. One would expect that the challenges presented to their conferences
and budgets would engross their best brains, but that often not the case.

Let me share with you some observations about how the technology potentially changes the conferences. Some of these observations are rather obvious, and it is remarkable that we would be still viewing them as needed enjoiners.

a. Communication potentially is vastly improved prior to the meeting. Panels and program can be negotiated and refined in a way never before possible. Preliminary programs can be posted for discussion and revision. Conferences need to consider the presence of the conference through Twitter, Google, Facebook, Pinterest, LinkedIn and ResearchGate. Academia.edu has over twenty million users. Conferences will possibly become less and less a once a year activity.

Extraordinarily, full use of these burgeoning resources is still not the norm: in the case of the actual conference schedule, often people only find out the program when it is too late to bring up problems of religious holidays, teaching schedules, and the like, or to ask that they be on a panel more logical to their topic. Simplistic as this sounds, the fine tuning that could take place isn’t by any means universal. A great deal more can be done through technology to make the physical meeting more worthwhile.

b. Drafts of papers can be posted so that fellow panelists, commentators, and indeed everyone has the chance to be
prepared. If you have a long memory, at conferences we used to have the paper room where we would deposit 50 copies and could go and buy the copies of others – at big conferences the room was often huge, and the problem of getting the required number of copies to the conference and getting the ones you wanted home was a major one. Now talking about the paper room is like talking about the rumble seat of a car. It is amazing that drafts in advance are not as routine as turning the ignition on a car.

c. We need to introduce usable, with emphasis on usable, skype type participation so that presenters can easily do it. Why are we always insisting that people do panels in person? This is not a rhetorical question. The key is facilitation, making it a natural and uncomplicated part of putting together a panel.

d. There is a terrible amount of waste. For me this is a major point. While some papers get into print, often that is years later and many papers never are put in print. We not only have to insist on drafts prior to the meetings, but have to do a lot more to get the refined and corrected papers into print. Our aim with all PSO conferences is to do that. If it is worth doing the research, then it is worth getting the research into circulation.

Academic credit for conference attendance is one way the conference scene could be changed and made more consequential. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, started in 1943, has pushed such
recognition for many years. The University of Wisconsin does it. Here is their format:

**Academic Credit**
Participants at the conference may obtain either Continuing Education Credits/Clock Hours, or Academic Credit (undergraduate and graduate students may earn 1-3 hours of academic credit at either the undergraduate or graduate level).

For details about academic credit, please contact: wpcacademics@gmail.com

**Continuing Education Credits/Clock Hours**
University of Wisconsin College of Education and Human Services Continuing Education Credits and Clock Hours

Variable 1-3 Continuing Education Unit (CEUs), 10-30 clock hours

Choose from:
- Educational Leadership and Policy
- Human Services
- Social Work

**C Course Requirements:**

1. **Session Log:** Attendees must engage in active participation in the conference. Attendees must complete and submit a formal session log that lists the title of the presenter, the title of the session(s), and the time length of each session. You may earn one CEU for each full day of attendances at the conference (up to three CEUs).

2. **Reflection Paper:** Attendees must submit a reflection paper (1-2 pages). This paper should examine your own personal development and lessons learned in this conference experience. Has your own understanding of the issues facing youth changed? Has your understanding of your own life experiences changed in any ways? What has been most personally meaningful and transformative in your training? What did you learn about yourself?

Now, the mystery is why with the growth of online education, more isn’t being done to use conferences as part of the courses. Won’t use of the conferences add something to the online courses?
There are some success stories, but it is not being unduly harsh to say that as of now, many of the numerous conferences of academia are not what they could or should be. Today we will hear about new ideas and the future, but very honestly, it is a case of learning to walk before you try to fly. We simply are not doing what we should to justify the travel and treasure that these sessions represent.

Of course now we want to hear about where we might be going rather than ruminate too much about the past. But I did feel as chair that I ought to sound a cautionary note, rather like the warnings about sunburn at the beach.