

The TCC Online Conference

- Faculty Sharing Information About eLearning Globally -

Bert Y. Kimura*¹

[SUMMARY] The TCC Online Conference, a virtual conference, is held annually online. This event was designed to enable faculty worldwide to share their expertise and engage in a productive dialog with their peers about innovations and practices in elearning. During the conference, a learning community is quickly created using a variety of synchronous and asynchronous Internet technologies, including email, web, webcasting, chat and BBS.

[KEYWORD] elearning, Internet, teaching and learning, virtual conferencing, professional development, global online conference, educational information

I Introduction

About TCC. What is an online conference and how is it different from a face-to-face counterpart? The TCC online conference follows a real-time schedule. It has a starting date and a closing date. It also includes live activities like webcasts and chat sessions that begin and end at a certain time. However, unlike the traditional conference, the online event is not limited to a specific location; it doesn't require the participant's physical presence; it includes many opportunities for dialog with fellow participants, presenters, keynoters, and conference staff; it is archivable, (i.e., most if not all discussions in the various media can be recorded for future review); and for the most part presentations and discussions are available anytime and from anywhere.

Goals & Objectives. 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 event 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.

Economy. For many years, educational leaders have sought innovative solutions for professional development to offset shrinking budgets. A typical conference experience for one faculty member from Hawai'i who travels to the US mainland may involve a week's absence from classes and cost upwards of 3,000 USD. This event allows faculty worldwide to participate at considerable less cost and loss of time from classes.

International Travel. Recently, global events such as SARS, terrorism and the war in Iraq have

severely reduced international travel. Participants in this conference, however, may participate regardless of local travel restrictions.

Funding. Nominal fees charged to the conference participants primarily fund this event. The Information Media and Technology Services department at University of Hawai'i - Kapi'olani Community College (KCC) and Osaka Gakuin University provide additional in-kind staffing, facilities and technical services. The event is also supported by a voluntary group of peers that serve on the advisory panel and the proposal review committee. A typical budget is 20,000 USD to cover direct expenses, overtime and honoraria.

Since 2002, the conference organizers have offered special institutional rates for colleges and universities affiliated with the League for Innovation (www.league.org) and the Western Cooperative (www.wcet.info). These two organizations, leaders in telecommunications and technology innovation in higher education in the US, have encouraged their members to participate in this conference.

Overview. In this brief paper, I will provide a brief history of the conference, describe how faculty share information about e-learning and provide a brief summary of the technology employed. Details about past conferences are archived and are accessible from the conference homepage: <http://tcc.kcc.hawaii.edu>.

II Brief History

Beginning. Since 1996, Kapi'olani Community College has hosted the TCC Online Conference. Dr. James Shimabukuro, Language Arts Professor at KCC, founded the conference. Professor Shimabukuro envisioned using a global network for faculty to share experiences, research results and practical experiences with each other. Professor Shimabukuro named this virtual conference,

*¹ Bert Kimura: University of Hawai'i - Kapi'olani Community College, Osaka Gakuin University e-mail bert@hawaii.edu, bert@utc.osaka-gu.ac.jp

"Teaching in the Community Colleges," after his email discussion list TCC-L.

Past conferences. The following is a list of past conferences and their themes:

TCC 2003: The Student Experience in Online and Hybrid Courses

TCC 2002: Hybrid Dreams, the Next Leap for Internet-Mediated Learning

TCC 2001: What Have We Discovered and Where Are We Headed?

TCC 2000: A Virtual Odyssey: What's Ahead for New Technologies in Learning?

TCC 1999: Best Practices in Delivering, Supporting, & Managing Online Learning

TCC 1998: Online Instruction: Trends and Issues Part II

TCC 1997: Trends and Issues in Online Instruction

TCC 1996: Innovative Instructional Practices

Demographics. The TCC Conference is a global event. Each year there are over 500 participants. In 2003, 556 individuals participated, representing 16 countries including Japan, United States, Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Israel, South Africa, and Kyrgyzstan. Single individuals represented American Samoa, Denmark, Germany, Guatemala, China, Singapore, Spain and Taiwan. Sixty-five percent (65%) of the participants were faculty, 12% administrators and department heads, and 6% technology support staff. Additionally there were 39 (7%) student (undergraduate and graduate) participants.

III How Sharing of Expertise Occurs

A central goal of this virtual conference is to create and maintain a sense of community among peers interested in teaching and learning. A poll taken after each conference shows that this has consistently been achieved. In 2003, for example, 75% of the evaluations stated that the conference created a good or excellent feeling of belonging to a conference "community."

Papers. Over 50 papers are published by the conference annually. Proposals for papers are peer reviewed. The paper is then submitted as a text document, edited for format, grammar, and consistency by another group of faculty peers, and posted by staff on the conference web site.

Each presenter also submits a photo and brief biography that is hyperlinked from the paper document. Presenters also provide additional contact information so that participants may contact the authors directly.

Synchronous Modes. The conference coordinator, in consultation with the advisory panel, selects leaders in the use of technology for teaching and

learning to provide keynote addresses. These addresses are presented using live webcasting technology (Horizonlive.com). Participants around the world can receive these broadcasts and interact real-time with the keynoter. On occasion, key presentations (in discussion or poster-session format) are also delivered via a web cast.

All presenters (papers, discussion topics, and poster sessions) facilitate one-hour chat sessions to respond to questions about their presentations or discuss related topics of interest with conference participants. The dialog from each chat session is retrieved and posted online as soon as possible. Participants who miss a session can review it while the conference is still in session.

Asynchronous Modes. Each year the conference staff selects a handful of current or controversial topics for discussion asynchronously, using BBS technology. This mode of interaction is vital for sharing due to time zone differences (typically all participants are actively participating during their normal working hours) and the fact that 21% of the 2003 participants used dial-up access services that limit the ability to receive broadband technologies such as web casts.

In 2003, the discussion topics included:

- What can faculty do to ensure success for their online students?
- Is there a "Profile" of an ideal student?
- What should students look for when "shopping" for an online education?
- How do students best prepare for an online or hybrid course?
- What strategies should students consider while taking an online course?

Pre-conference & Assistance. Prior to the conference, the conference staff conducts a pre-conference so that participants will (1) become aware of time zone differences, (2) be able to test their computer equipment to receive the conference activities, and (3) practice using the discussion board and online chat interfaces.

Additionally, information is distributed to all registered participants through an email distribution list to prepare them for conference activities. During the conference 10-15 email messages are also delivered to participants to alert them of important events or potential problems that they may encounter.

The conference staff also maintains an online help web page and email list in order to respond quickly to individuals that need assistance.

IV Technologies Used

From the beginning, conference coordinators felt that this event must be accessible to everyone

without requiring a high level of technical skill of the participants. Additionally, the technologies used must not interfere with the content being discussed.

The conference, however, also provides an opportunity to test newer and more exciting technologies. Consequently, a limited number of events are designed so that if broadband access is needed to participate, alternatives are provided to others using less bandwidth intensive technologies. For example, keynote addresses are delivered using a multimedia webcasting format on a real-time basis. However, each keynoter hosts an online web-based chat session at a later time that only requires a java-enabled web browser with a dial-up connection. By planning carefully, the conference coordinators have been able to provide participants with anytime, anywhere access to the conference activities.

The table below summarizes the technologies used for various conference activities:

Activity	Technology	Provider
Papers	Web html or php	UH-KCC*
Discussion boards	Web Board, vBulletin	UH-KCC
Chats	Biap Chat	UH-KCC
Web casts	Horizonlive.com	ULiveandLearn
Announcements	Email	UH System
Video tours	Quicktime, Windows Media	UH-KCC

* UH = University of Hawai'i

IV Conclusion

Future directions. In the next few years, conference organizers will continue to promote this event to faculty around the world. If necessary, conference fees will be waived so that faculty in less affluent, third-world countries, will also have access to this valuable resource.

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. Whenever possible, alternatives will be provided to these individuals.

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.

Summary. This brief paper provides a short history of the TCC Online Conference, describes how faculty share information about e-learning and provides a brief description of the technology employed. This conference enables faculty worldwide to share their expertise and engage in a productive dialog with their peers about innovations in technology for teaching and learning.

During the conference, a learning community is quickly created and lasting relationships are made between faculty for future collaboration and information exchange.

The details of past conferences are archived and are accessible from the conference homepage: <http://tcc.kcc.hawaii.edu>. Usually, the most recent conference archives remain closed until announcements for the next conference is distributed. Access to TCC 2003 may require use a username (tcc) and password (kumu03).

V References

Shimabukuro, Jim. "What is an Online Conference?" <http://tcc.kcc.hawaii.edu/whatis.html>

Kimura, Bert & Jim Shimabukuro. "The Teaching in the Community Colleges (TCC) Online Conference" *LeagueTLC Innovation Express*. July, 2001.

<http://www.league.org/leaguetic/express/inn0107.htm>

Wang, Yu-mei. "Online Conference: A Participant's Perspective." *T.H.E. Journal* 26.8 (1999): 70-76.