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DEVELOPING THE DEVELOPERS - SUPPORTING DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

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Abstract

Delivering online tuition has become standard practice in most universities with many students receiving part of their tuition online. However, so far there appears to be a resistance to utilising online delivery for staff and academic development.

An online academic development conference was delivered to 150 teaching staff delegates over the course of a week. The conference structure was to have a keynote presentation and eleven shorter discussion presentations, each with their own dedicated asynchronous discussion forum.

Conference presenters were each asked to produce a video presentation of up to 7 minutes and run an associated online forum.

This paper reports on the experience of the presenters in producing their video presentations and running the forums. It will highlight the valuable development opportunity for presenters as well as summarising their experiences.

Finally it will outline the lessons we have learnt and propose some recommendations for others considering running online staff development conferences.

Keywords: online professional development, academic development, staff development.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Open University (OU) is a distance learning institution with over 200,000 students who study with the support of approximately 6000 part-time Associate Lecturers (AL). Management of the ALs is split into 13 geographical areas across the UK, with each offering a programme of staff development opportunities for their constituents. The conference reported on in this paper was organised for the South East region which supports approximately 700 ALs.

Delivering staff development to remote teachers is a challenge faced by an increasing number of educational institutions, as there is a growth in the number offering distance learning programmes supported by part-time home based staff. Historically the OU has supported ALs through a combination of written materials, mentoring and face-to-face induction and staff development events. Although routinely using online communications to support students, relatively little use has been made of the online learning environment for supporting AL professional development. Of the small amount of staff development which is provided online, the majority is delivered synchronously using OULive, a version of Blackboard Collaborate, or similar platforms.

It was decided to run an online staff development conference for ALs within the South East region to compliment the face to face programme being offered. It was hoped that it would attract a different audience to the face-to-face events, and that delegates would benefit from learning in the same environment as that used by their students. The motivation was equally to widen reach and deliver a different learning experience.

The delegate experience of the online conference will be reported on elsewhere, this paper considers the experience of the presenters who were asked to prepare and pre-record presentations which were then discussed in asynchronous online forums.

1.1 Conference structure

The conference was delivered using the OU virtual learning environment (VLE), which is based on the Moodle platform.

Delegates were invited to register, via a wiki, in advance of the conference which meant they would receive joining instructions and a reminder message once the conference opened. Access to the

conference website was restricted to OU staff only. Although staff outside the target group could access the website, it is unlikely that they would have found the link if they had not been actively invited to join the conference.

The conference website offered a brief description of the conference and how it would run. The home page offered a keynote presentation, access to daily summaries and links to the conference presentations and discussion forums. Each of the presentations, including the keynote, had an associated asynchronous forum. With the exception of the keynote, the forums were moderated by the presenters with back-up from two experienced moderators. The moderators also produced daily summaries of the forum activity to facilitate delegates joining part way through the conference. The conference website was open for 8 days, which included one weekend.

2 RECRUITMENT OF PRESENTERS

Two groups of presenters were recruited for the online conference. The first group were members of OU staff who were invited to give presentations based on their areas of expertise. They were individually approached by the conference organisers. The second group of presenters were recruited from the AL cohort through a competitive process. ALs were invited to submit a proposal for a presentation to be included in the conference. The proposals were considered by the organising committee, to ensure quality and relevance.

In both cases, presenters were chosen for their ability to offer interesting content and it was stressed that technical ability should not be a barrier to participating in the conference, as they would be supported by the conference organisers. A total of eleven presenters were recruited, eight by invitation and three through the proposal submission process. All but one of the presenters had previously presented at face to face conferences, and all were familiar with the AL audience. The presenters either participated as part of their substantive role or were paid for their time, to cover both preparation and moderating the forums.

2.1 Presenter brief

Each presenter was asked to produce a presentation up to seven minutes long consisting of slides and a voiceover. Seven minutes was chosen as research has shown that this is about the limit of student concentration span, and it was assumed the same would be true of ALs [1, 2]

Pecha Kucha [3] style presentation, using 20 slides each displayed for 20 seconds, was recommended but not enforced. Presenters were free to choose how to produce their presentations with the only requirement being that they provided the organisers with a single video file which included both their slides and audio. The intention was for presenters to be able to use whatever software they were familiar with, in order to reduce any technical difficulties with production.

The keynote presenter was supported by the university audio visual unit who provided professional production facilities, and hence the keynote is not discussed here.

3 PRESENTATION PRODUCTION

It was discovered that most of the presenters had little or no previous experience of producing online presentations. Six of the eleven presenters needed significant support from the conference organisers to produce their presentations, which was made more challenging because there was wide variation in the approaches used. Of the remaining five, one had very poor sound quality so the presenter was asked to rerecord the audio. Two of the presenters were located in offices on the same site as the organisers, so face to face technical support was provided. The remaining four presenters who needed help had the added challenge of being remote from the conference organisers and so received technical support by telephone and email.

Most of the presenters produced their slides using Powerpoint. Presentations with added audio were then variously prepared by each presenter, using available software including Jing, Microsoft Moviemaker and Powerpoint audio recording.

Although presenters were asked to provide a single file of their presentation with audio and slides embedded, in two cases the conference organisers decoupled the audio which was then edited before repackaging with the slides. In both cases this improved the flow of the presentation and reduced it to within the seven minute time limit.

In order to address accessibility, transcripts of the presentations were provided. The majority of the presenters had fully scripted their presentations prior to recording, which was useful for producing the transcripts. Three of the presenters did not use scripts and so transcripts were produced post production by the conference organisers.

4 EVALUATION

Each of the presenters was asked to complete an evaluation survey relating to both the experience of producing their presentations and their wider involvement in the online conference. Seven of the eleven presenters completed the questionnaire. Some additional feedback was sent direct to the conference organisers and the conference moderators.

4.1 Evaluation of presentation production

In all cases, presenters reported that preparation of their presentations had taken longer than expected. Part of this was due to the overhead in learning new technical skills, as they had not prepared online presentations before. It was acknowledged that these were useful skills which they would be able to use again in the future and that future presentation preparation would be less time consuming. Several presenters felt that giving clear instructions for a single methodology would have been helpful. Two the presenters who completed the evaluation suggested that providing a staff development session on producing presentations would improve the experience and potentially encourage more individuals to come forward to present in future online conferences.

In addition to the requirement to develop technical skills, it also took more time than expected to prepare the content for the presentations. It was found to be challenging to produce very concise presentations, compared with workshop style presentations which they were used to preparing for the equivalent face to face conferences. Seven of the eleven presentations adhered rigidly to the pecha kucha format and found it particularly challenging to stick to the 20 second timing for each slide whilst ensuring a synchronised connection between the audio and the visuals. However, the individual who expressed most difficulty also identified this as a strength of the format as it “makes sure you don’t try to include too much in the time available”. Although an evaluation of presentations from the delegate perspective was carried out, there was no relationship between the level of adherence to pecha kucha format and feedback received. However, given the seven minute restriction which was enforced, regardless of format, the difference between free-form and pecha kucha presentations was not great.

One of the presenters who used pecha kucha format included a number of slides which were just an image. Whilst this is in line with the pecha kucha ethos, they found from the subsequent forum discussions that some of the metaphors they had chosen to be represented by the images were not obvious to the conference delegates. Consequently they would consider using two or three words of explanatory text with each image, if they were to use this format again in the future.

The audio quality on the presentations varied from acceptable to good. Although none of the feedback from either presenters or delegates mentioned audio quality being problematic, the organisers felt this was an area for improvement.

4.2 Evaluation of presentation forums

The presenters were each asked to moderate an asynchronous online forum where attendees were invited to discuss the presentation. Two conference wide moderators were also employed to assist the presenters and prepare daily summaries of the whole conference. Overall the entire conference website was accessed by over 200 unique visitors. Across all twelve presentations, including the keynote, there were 680 forum posts.

The majority of presenters were surprised at the high level of engagement in the forums which resulted in a higher level of involvement by them than expected. The forums had an average of 49 postings. The least active forum has 20 postings and the most active 156. Several presenters commented that they found forum moderating challenging, and they felt that they would not have been able to manage their forums without the additional support of the conference moderators. Several presenters commented on the fact that delegates participated more prolifically in the forums than they had observed students doing in similar online activities. They found this motivating to see highly effective use of forums and those presenters who are also ALs have reported that they have since worked to reinvigorate their student forums.

Some of the presenters found it useful to be able to reiterate the key points of their presentation within the forum, whilst others found that the conversation drifted away from the initial focus. It was not felt that either scenario was problematic, rather just observed that the two different situations arose. .

The overall feedback from both the presenters and the conference delegates was that the conference had offered a useful opportunity to increase experience of using the VLE, widened access to staff development for ALs and had prompted a high level of engagement.

All the presenters reported that they would be keen to participate in future online conferences. One presenter explicitly stated that they had “benefited more from the conference... than if I had just been a participant”.

5 DISCUSSION

Within education, the purpose of staff development includes aspects of subject knowledge, theoretical underpinning and fundamentals of teaching practice. In the context of digital or online delivery of teaching, Dede [4] urges that universities should make “strategic investments in physical plant, technical infrastructure and professional development...[to facilitate]... recruiting top students and teaching them effectively”[4, p15]. Whilst the OU is an open access institution, it is keen to attract a full range of students including those considered to be top students, and to teach all students effectively in order to provide a positive learning experience. The shift in recently years to increasing use of online delivery through the VLE has necessitated professional development in online teaching to be a priority.

Gregory and Salmon [5] highlighted a tendency for staff development to “teach about teaching theory and alienate large numbers of potential online teachers who want practical guides” [5, p256]. By adopting the use of the VLE for providing staff development we enable ALs to experience learning in the same environment as their students. This is going a step further than providing a practical guide, as participants are gaining real experience as students themselves. This authentic learning situation [6] allows individuals to reflect on their learning experience and then incorporate that into their teaching practice.

The presenters at the online conference were able to participate both as teachers and as learners. They could watch other presentations and join in the forum discussions. For the majority of presenters, and conference delegates, the use of this type of pre-recorded presentation within the OU VLE was novel. This experience of different teaching and learning approaches helps practitioners to build up a toolbox of approaches from which they can select as appropriate. From their participation in the conference, presenters developed both the technical skills needed to produce presentations and experiential knowledge of how such presentations can be used to support teaching and learning. As highlighted in the evaluation feedback, the presenters recognised the added benefit of presenting over just participating in the conference. There was also a motivating effect, in addition to the skills and experience that they could then take back to their substantive teaching role.

The feedback on the experience of preparing the presentations was in line with that reported in the literature. Using Carvalho’s [7] taxonomy of podcasts, the presentations would be considered informative (presents concepts), enhanced (combines audio and video), and of moderate length (6-15 minutes). The overall feedback indicated that the seven minute restriction on presentation length was about right. Long presentations “generally cause a loss of attention and a subsequent decrease in comprehension”[7 p3] Guo *et al* [2] reported the average engagement time for MOOC video presentations was 6 minutes, which again supports our decision to restrict the length.

Short presentations, such as pecha kucha format, have the disadvantage that the presenters cannot cover complex concepts in detail [3], but the associated forums allowed them to expand on the topics introduced where needed. Regardless of the level of adherence to the pecha kucha format, the presenters found substantial preparation was needed to produce short and succinct presentations. This phenomenon, in common with experiences reported elsewhere [3,7], was expected by the organisers and hence covered by paying participants for their time, if providing staff development was not part of their substantive role.

The level and depth of discussion in the forums was greater than expected by either the organisers or the presenters. Expectations are likely to have been heavily influenced by the experience of generally low participation by students, both directly experienced in the OU and reported elsewhere [8]. It is not clear what the drivers were for this high level of participation. Potentially this could be explained by the

AL cohort having a greater percentage of individuals who are willing and able to act in a resident mode [9] within the VLE than the student body does. This goes against Prensky's [10] theory of digital natives and digital immigrants. Currently the majority of ALs will have been born prior to Prensky's cut off point of 1980, so would fall into the immigrants category and we would expect lower levels of participation. Alternatively it may be that those with an interest in education are more likely to participate in discussion aspects of online learning than students of other disciplines [11]. The level and style of forum moderation and facilitation has also been suggested as a key driver for levels of activity and engagement. A high level of activity can lead to information overload, where individuals are likely to end their participation [12, 13]. The use of the summary postings helped participants keep track [10] and also facilitated accessibility for those who joined in the later days of the conference period. The summaries also gave the presenters a quick reference to recap on the discussions so they could support both linking back and moving on of the conversations.

The conference had deliberately been designed to offer a range of presentations with the intention that delegates could select those of most interest and relevance to their individual development needs. Rovai [14] suggests that offering a choice of discussion topics improves levels of discussion participation. Unfortunately the restrictions of the OU VLE meant that the presentations had to be displayed on the conference website in a linear fashion. Consequently it appears from the usage statistics and the feedback that the majority of delegates went through the presentations in order, rather than reading abstracts and actively selecting which presentations to engage with. Giving clear instructions and/or displaying the presentations in a different way may have changed the pattern of engagement across the different presentations.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Running an asynchronous online conference was found to be a very useful way of providing staff development, with the added advantage of allowing participants to access at a time and place convenient to them. Using the VLE also allowed the delegates to have experience of learning using the same platform as the students which they teach.

Although there were a number of challenges which had to be overcome, both the organisers and presenters felt that this was a useful and exciting way to deliver staff development which should be repeated in the future.

The recommendations set out below are for supporting the production of presentations for asynchronous online conferences. Further evaluation, and resulting recommendations, of running an online conference will be published elsewhere.

- Choose a standard file format for the presentations.
- Design a standard production method for presentations and provide step by step instructions to all presenters.
- Restrict the length of presentations to avoid loss of concentration by viewers.
- Provide specific presentation staff development for potential presenters in advance of inviting submission of proposals for consideration. This should cover both technical skills and support for producing succinct presentations.
- Advise presenters to allow more time for production of their presentations than they would for preparing a face to face session.
- Expect a high level of forum participation when presenting to online education professionals.
- Provide discussion summaries in forums to allow easy re-capping and to support participants who join part way through

As the OU is an entirely distance learning institution with a heavy reliance on the VLE and online teaching, it attracts teaching staff who are likely to have a particular interest in this area. Consequently there may have been better engagement with an online conference than there would be amongst teaching staff for whom online teaching is a more peripheral aspect of their practice. Other institutions considering this type of staff development activity may want to consider the level of digital literacy amongst their target group and potentially include some form of VLE familiarisation in order to support their delegates to get full benefit from such a conference.

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