Finnish Journal of eHealth and eWelfare

Students as partners to organize an international conference. What did they learn?

Pirkko Kouri PhD[1], Outi Ahonen MSc[2]

[1] Savonia University of Applied Sciences, Kuopio, Finland; [2] Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Lohja, Finland

Pirkko Kouri, PhD, Principal Lecturer in Healthcare Technology, Savonia University of Applied Sciences, Kuopio, FINLAND. Email: pirkko.kouri@savonia.fi.

Abstract

In Finland higher education system consists of both theoretical universities and universities of applied sciences (UASs). Today students in higher education institutions are encouraged to find their way and teaching and learning occurs in different environments. A scientific conference provides prerequisites for high-quality, working-life based higher education experience as well as familiarizes with research, development and innovation practices. Furthermore, an international conference offers both new possibilities to disseminate one's research and development work and to build international co-operation and new networks. The Finnish Society for Telemedicine and eHealth (FTeHS) works on voluntary basis and needs extra help in conference building. This offers a great opportunity to cooperation with students. The recruitment criteria for the students were e.g. prior experience in conferences or equivalent, and good English language skills. The master level students, five of them, were chosen in late autumn 2017 from the two Universities of Applied sciences. The article enlightens students' experiences related to the preparatory and execution phases of the conference. The instructions are given what the conference work is. The article describes how students are planning, realizing and evaluating the conference in collaboration with conference organizations, and simultaneously having a fruitful and many-sided learning experience. The research data was collected via meeting notes made by the student in meeting's secretary role, students' learning reports, emailing messages and WhatsApp messages. Article focuses on student's learning more than teaching.

Keywords: conference, student, learning

Introduction

The Finnish Society of Telemedicine and eHealth (FSTeH) promotes the health of the population through versatile digitalization activities and disperse the expert knowledge widely within health care. The FSTeH arranges annually conference, which includes research and/or development work presentations, site visits. FSTeH aims at developing a flexible, many-sided communication between its members, and publishes information and future activities, and supports e.g. with grants research within the discipline. It has known long time that conferences enhance learning and foster critical thinking of the participants. Furthermore, during the conference targets of the teaching are directed to organize the students' self-educating activities, to develop and establish their searching abilities and encouraging their skill-usage. It is clear that the project teaching technologies are also based on self-study, so multi-field students they complete each other. The complex activities of teacher and student are determined according to the main idea of the project: project work complex includes seven periods (preparation,

planning, researching, analyzing, making conclusion, giving reports, result evaluating). That proves the great effectiveness of using the project teaching technology. During the research it was proved that the use of the project teaching method contributes to master the thinking creativeness of the students.

On the other hand also health and social care professionals role in process of developing digital services is important to get useful and well-functioning eHealth services. Finnish Nurse Association´s eHealth strategy support strongly nurses to take part of the development processes. The concrete innovation need´s the social innovations around it to be implemented to the real practice. Also multiprofessional co-operation is important element when professionals are developing eHealth services and the conference has many element´s which support student´s to work in multiprofessional groups.

Latest conference #eHealth2018 - The 23rd Finnish National Conference on Telemedicine and eHealth under the main theme "Health communities facing cyber transformation' was during 15.-17.3.2018 – a Cruise on the Baltic Sea. The FSTeH organized the happening for the first time in collaboration with The International Society for Telemedicine and eHealth (ISfTeH). Finnish Society is the second oldest national member in ISfTeH after USA. The Conference covered themes from updating the knowledge about International and Nordic eHealth trends and solutions. The program served health care professionals and service providers as well as researchers in multidisciplinary eHealth area. The Conference topics were: Citizens as partners: Disrupting healthcare; Cyber era in leadership and education; Benchmarking nationwide eHealth communities; Beating Cancer with the help of cyber community; Tackling acute crisis in local and distant environments; Collaborating innovations and 'My eHealth solutions' around the world.

Scientific themes included e.g. national eHealth implementations, services for developing countries, personal health data utilization, on-line health services, machine learning, mobile applications, eLearning and decision support tools. In conclusion, the conference had 20 top-notch keynote lectures from EU, Nordic and Finland, and 65 abstracts of which the scientific committee selected both rapid 5-minutes-oral and compact scientific presentations and paper posters for the poster exhibition. The conference offered a meeting place and new information to physicians, nursing staff, physiotherapist and other health and social care professions as well as to responsible persons for management, planning and education. From the theoretical university students viewpoint the conference contributed 10 hours of theoretical training for Finnish physicians and dentists' special competence for healthcare information technology. In addition to, the university students got an opportunity to present their own research and development results and/or research group's outcomes.

Master students are adult students which have unique learning styles due to their education and long working experience. Master students from two UASs got five ECTS-credits joint studies. Furthermore, there were students who participated Hackathon event, #eHealth2018 Game Jam. A conference is unique environment in which knowledge transfer can be seen as a multilevel phenomenon that can be realized on the individual, intra-organizational, or inter-organizational level. Building a conference is a project in which project participants learn a lot of various things. The following chapters describe how conference was both planned and executed and what was the students' role and learning experience during this process.

Preparatory phase

In accordance to Cambridge dictionary term conference is defined as a time-scheduled project in which planned and scheduled work (see Figure 1) or an activity that is finished and intended to achieve a particular purpose (Cambridge dictionary 2018) FSTeH conference project started with preparatory phase lasting around three months (Figure 1). The new preparation started after FSTeH board had familiarized to the feedback of the last conference. It gave a good basis for the planning of new event. Simultaneously ever changing eHealth and telemedicine field produces new information which were

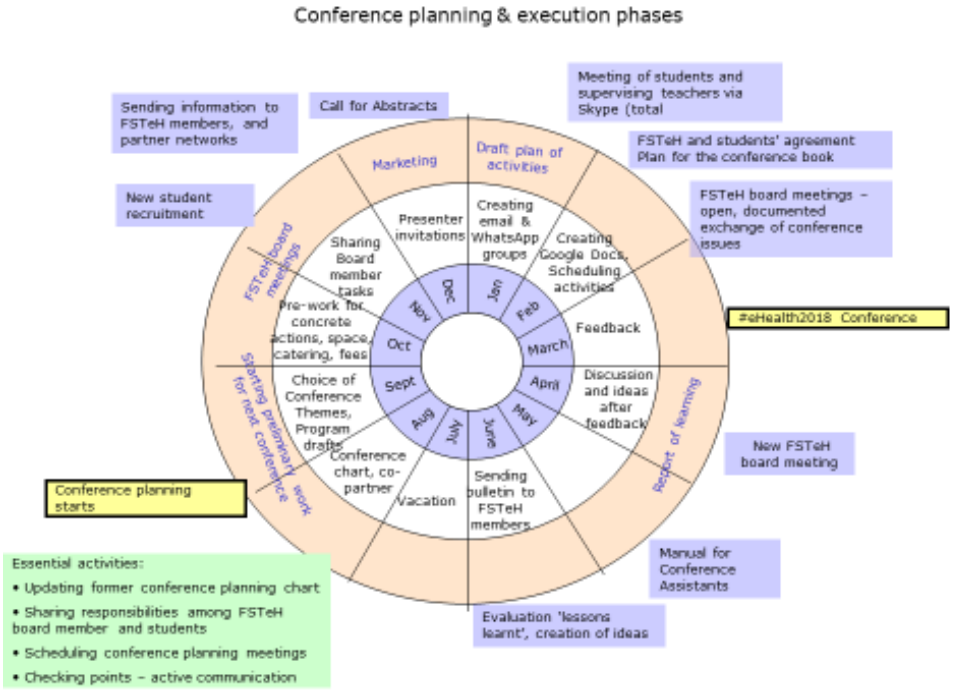

Figure 1. Conference planning and execution phases.

taken into account when planning conference programme. In order to organize well-working conference it is based on effective and active multimodal communication throughout the process of conference-project.

Two teachers, members of the FSTeH board, were authorized by the board to share an announcement to seek students for conference-assisting. The recruitment criteria were such as master level student, interest in digitalization within the health care, early experience in organizing events and fluent English language skills. There were several students who presented themselves. All master students had their personal study goals and curriculum as a target to take part of organizing conference. Some of students had project studies, some of developing eHealth and welfare services, two students studied in the programme called Master in Digital Health. After selection of five students, teachers organized digital meeting´s via Skype to plan the conference together, and also a meeting with five chosen students. FSTeH made agreement with all students. Furthermore, UAS made separate agreement and with the conference learning report formed the approval of degree studies. In accordance to Zulch the communication methods that are the most essential to utilize during the preparation and execution of a project are written, oral and electronic communication, of which written and oral communication are regarded as the most effective. With the world in the center of a social media revolution, we found out that there is a need for more social media like Facebook, twitter and WhatsApp etc. which were used extensively for the purpose of effective and fast communication. In addition to emailing and GoogleDocs system were harnessed for even more fluent communication. The teachers also took part as board members of The FSTeH to their meetings and where cooperating with both groups. The student´s had also WhatsApp group to facilitate the preparatory phase together with teachers and at the beginning of the conference also other FSTeH board members joined to the WhatsApp group to communicate during the conference to make best possible experience to cus-

tomers. The Conference was organized on a cruise and all material were taken in to the ship. Altogether over 400 WhatsApp messages were sent during Conference planning and execution phases. The messages dealt with timing, reserving conference materials e.g. name badges, necklaces, conference folders, and who organizes in order the conference book materials e.g. right spelling of presenter and name of presentation, right session, oral or paper presentation. (Figure 2)

Execution phase of the Conference

Two-day Conference was hold in the Baltic see. This meant that most of the participants stayed on board during sessions, hackathon and exhibition shows. In conclusion, the Conference had 20 top-notch keynote lectures from EU, Nordic and Finland, and 65 abstracts of which the scientific committee selected both rapid 5-minutes-oral and compact scientific presentations and paper posters for the poster exhibition. The Conference had over 30 nationalities present, and nearly 250 eHealth professionals shared experiences and built networks. The enterprise exhibition presented latest innovation. The Conference had over 30 nationalities present, and nearly 250 eHealth professionals shared experiences and built networks. The enterprise exhibition presented latest innovation. Internationality was part of the conference in all level. The students as conference assistants met all participants on harbor and took care of the registration. The student register each participant, gave Conference folder, took permission to photo-shooting or recording video and dissemination of these via different platforms. Furthermore, student asked the signed approval of the presents that member of FSTeH can utilize material. If need be they accompanied the participants on the boat. One student wrote that 'The speed of us dashing across the fitted carpeting was so harsh that it wore holes in my socks', still the experience of the whole conference was unique in a positive way.

Each session was named and student responsibilities were shared: helping to transfer usually power-point presentation, showing how audio-visual tools work, testing voice of the microphone, and providing water glass on the table, instructing presenter and showing him/her time signs for the presenters to indicate how much time they have left to perform. Listening to the presentations the students learnt a lot of global eHealth and telemedicine, got new insights and experienced how eHealth solutions are done in different organizations in versatile countries.

Example of preparatory work

- The first meetings for planning
- Attending a meeting with supervising teachers in order to find out about additional tasks such as planning the execution of the method of measurement.
- Beginning the creation of the hand programme on and to continuing to work on it in following days. Designing the cover for the programme with help from an outside party.
- Requesting quotations from three printing houses and sending them to education organization e.g. Savonia and Laurea
- Holding a Skype meeting on in order to compile the work execution programme.
- Planing outfit: Fitting on uniform outfit which will be worn by the student participants during the conference. The students will arrange the fitting with the contact person either individually or as a group.
- Beforehand preparations the night before the actual conference.
- Technical readiness; bringing the computer to the conference space, technique check-up, testing and installations.
- Poster show. Finding out where we can find the walls for the posters and if need be transporting the mountings to the conference place. Planning the poster show and putting the posters up.
- Making a survey basis for the participants of the conference in order to develop and improve future conferences.

Figure 2. An example list of work before the conference.

Hackathon as a special learning environment for the students

FSTeH has organized twice a hackathon. This type of happening brings people from various backgrounds together for problem-solving. Participants were invited by an open invitation and challenged to create new digital solutions only in 28,5 hours. Hackathons are typically organized as intense, short-duration competitions where teams generate innovative solutions. Finally participants or groups present their solution and best one wins via open voting by conference participants. The hackathon model integrates collaboration, idea generation and group learning by bringing together different stakeholders in a mutually supportive setting.

The Hackathon was organized by Games for Health Finland and it brought together healthcare professionals and game makers many of them were students. The goal was to create new ideas and ways to use eHealth technology and promote eHealth with gamification. These games have desired health outcomes and are used to encourage citizens to take responsibility for their own self-care. The young participants, 20 persons, created for only 18,5 hours to show a new solution to some health issue. As a result five demos related to patient safety, excitement and flow. The best rewarded idea-phase solution was ”GoodMe” game, which focus is poorly performing children, and how to prevent them feeling bad by collecting data related to well-being. The data is collected when a child is playing on the educator’s side. This data monitors the well-being of the child and addresses possible warning signals. Along with the whole conference programme the hackathon offers students an excellent learning and creating innovative solutions in the field of digitalized health care.

Learning experiences of the students

When learning in am practice-based conference environment the leading thought is how each student is working and especially the environment should make use of everyone’s competences and skills. In this way learning happens in a safe and supportive space. As a whole, the conference covered a large variety of applications and experiments in eHealth and telemedicine around the world. From a student point of view, the event shed light on the latest innovations in the eHealth field and provided a valuable occasion for international networking. Student being a novice learnt a lot from experts, and could ask questions more accurately. This conference offered a platform to practice both spoken and written English. Students felt the speaking and understanding of English was fruitful and enhanced the self-confidence for the future similar, also sometimes sudden occasions. Around the world, nations are facing changes in the healthcare environment and these conferences enable wide benchmarking of new tried-out innovations. As an adult and simultaneously working student one can be in the frontline to disseminate good practices in real work life. Students learnt from each other’s and fluent communication made the conference assistance well-functioning.

eHealth conference tied both theoretical studies and/or eHealth development project and complemented other study units as well with added value. In regards to the hands-on aspect of the eHealth conference, teamwork and communication skills were enhanced during the event. International perspective added pressure at times due to cultural diversity. Whole student group made so much work before the conference that we managed to avoid most of problems that could have been happen. The students experienced that they got once in a lifetime opportunity to learn what was going on with eHealth and Telemedicine around the world. The shared interest in eHealth opened a whole new world to exchange views, and learning related to both practical experiences and research outcomes.

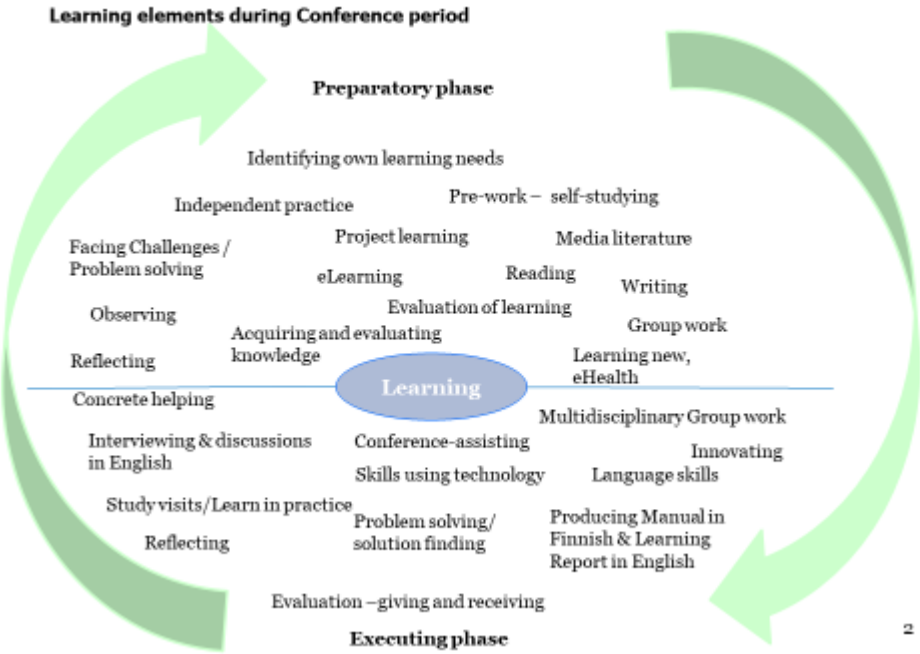

Figure 3. Learning elements during conference period.

Figure 3 collects elements of learning during the whole conference period. The adult master level students were easy to guide and give concrete tasks because the students showed strong commitment to their studies. Learning is also a process especially in conference environment in which also unexpected situations occur.

Discussion

FTeHS collected feedback from the participants and the conference was successful, also student assistance was valued. During the whole conference period (from planning to end evaluation) students were encouraged to evaluate their learning needs, goals of practical learning, benefits of conference work, and future challenges. Student self-assessment involves students in evaluating their own work and learning progress. Self-assessment is a valuable learning tool as well as part of an assessment process. Through self-assessment, students identify their own skill gaps, where their knowledge is weak. Via reading the learning report it showed how students learned, got good impression of the real world of eHealth and Telemedicine. They got professional tools for their work and theoretical knowledge which they can use as part of their studies. One student reflected and evaluated that 'the best personal learning was to see and listen top-level experts from various fields and listen fluent discussions, which purpose is: The person who own best knowledge, should share it to others'.

Acknowledgments

Thank you for the master students from Savonia UAS Hanna Hytönen, Tomi Vepsäläinen and Laurea UAS Anu Mattila, Birgitta Tetri, Susanna Vettenranta.

References

You can get references from writers.